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Alexei Maximovitch Peshkoff

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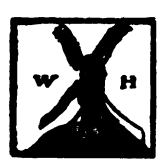

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ALEXEI MAXIMOVITCH PESHKOFF was born March 14, 1869, at Nijni Novgorod. On both his father's and mother's side he belonged to the people; his father followed the trade of a jobbing upholsterer, and his mother was the daughter of a dyer. He was left an orphan when quite young, and he passed then under the care of his grandfather, a cruel and tyrannical old man, who had already so ill-treated young Alexei's father when a lad, that he ran away from home.

Peshkoff attended school for about five months, but having caught smallpox, his grandfather took him away from school, and sent him at the age of nine as errand-boy to a shoemaker. Here the child scalded his hand badly and was sent back to his home. His grandfather next apprenticed him to a draughtsman, from whom young Peshkoff ran away. In order to keep himself he went as galley-boy on a Volga steamer, where he helped the ship's cook. This cook was a reader, and something of a character; he possessed a small library which he

allowed his galley-boy to read, and it was here that the lad felt the first awakening of literary instinct, though he had always, from the time he left school at nine years old, read everything that fell into his hands. The cook's library contained amongst other authors Nekrassoff; translations of the works of Ann Radcliff; a volume of Sovrememick, whose editor was Tchernishewsky, the translator and commentator of John Stuart Mill; Iscra, and several works in Little Russian; the lives of the saints, and works by some mystical writers; some odd volumes of Dumas, and some Freemasons' literature. This curious collection of miscellaneous writings gave young Peshkoff, now fifteen, a burning desire to obtain some degree of culture, and awoke in him the wish to write. He left the steamer, and wandered to Kazan, where he was told free instruction could be obtained. Here, in order to keep himself, he had to enter a bakery at three roubles, or six shillings, a month; and he speaks of this work as being the hardest that he ever did, with the exception of work in the salt mines, which he describes in one of his essays. A story written later in life, called 'The Outcasts,' is a truthful reflection of the people amongst whom he lived and worked at this period of his life, and it contains much that is autobiographical. He lived amongst these outcasts of society, chopping wood and carrying burdens, earning a living as best he could, and in the intervals

of manual work picking up what instruction fell in his way. On leaving Kazan he tried his luck at Tzaritzine, where he worked as a signalman on the railway.

At the age of twenty he had to return to Nijni Novgorod in order to perform his years of military service, but he failed to pass the health test, and was rejected as not strong enough to serve. For some time after this he sold "kwass" in the streets, until he managed to get a situation as clerk in a lawyer's office. This lawyer, whose name was Lanine, eventually took a great interest in the young man, and influenced him much in his reading and general culture. At this time also, Peshkoff, being in better circumstances, was able to join a group of young intellectuals amongst whom was Federoff, who, on seeing some of Peshkoff's writings, declared the youth showed great literary talent. But a settled and sedentary life did not suit him, and he never really felt himself at home among these young intellectuals; preferring his wandering life, supporting himself from day to day by unskilled manual labour, and sharing the society of tramps, day-labourers and outcasts. So in 1890 we find him again wandering through Southern Russia, working one month as a sawyer, the next as a stevedore lighterman, and in 1892 he was employed at Tiflis in the Caucasus in some railway engineering shops. It was during this period that

his first story, 'Markar Tchoudra,' appeared in a local paper; but his first real literary *début* was made in 1893 when he published 'Tchelkache,' a short story containing marvellous impressionist effects of water and of night.

The budding talent displayed in these and other stories being now recognized, he returned to the Volga, where he had spent so much of his youth, and began contributing short stories to the 'Volgeschky Viesnick.' These were followed by a longer story, 'Emilia Pilai,' which appeared in an important Moscow paper, the 'Russky Viedomoski'; and a lucky chance having brought him across Korolenko, Peshkoff, who had now taken for his *nom de plume* the title of Görki (the Russian for bitter), through the influence of this leading man of letters was able to place his writings in some of the most important periodicals of the day. Korolenko did much for him also in the way of advice, and Görki wrote later of this period of his life: "If I learnt little, it was not Korolenko's fault, but my own."

Broad sympathy with, and understanding of every expression of human nature, seems to be the prevailing characteristic of Görki's writings; whilst his realism has a special quality, in that it is never forced, never *voulu*, as is too often the case with writers of another class who make literary studies of the lives of the people. Görki, having

lived the life of the tramp, of the out-of-work loafer, of the slum inhabitant, is saturated with the detail of that life, and possesses the true artistic faculty necessary for reproducing it. Many of his so-called "stories" are rather studies and sketches, so slight is the plot, so impressionist is the form under which he reproduces the "bits of life" with which he has come in contact. He seems to succeed in the art of "viewing life as a whole, and viewing it sanely"; but his pictures are of necessity tinged with pessimism, for he is the mouthpiece of the unprivileged, the sweated, the "lapsed and lost." This vein of pessimism is, however, relieved by a spirituality, a sensitiveness to the consolations of music, of light, and cloud, and water effects, of nature's healing inspiration, which wholly redeem his work from the reproach of empty, crushing pessimistic teaching. He is essentially the prophet of revolt,—revolt against the dreariness, the monotony, the inhumanity of drudgery, which keeps men and women working at high pressure like machines, in order that they may be able to earn—just daily bread. . . . As the shoemaker Grischka says in one of the stories published in this volume: "And why do we need daily bread? In order to be able to work! And why do we work, but to obtain daily bread? What's the sense of that?"

He has certainly made very real for us a large class of our fellow human beings whom before we

scarcely recognized in any other way than in their outward form of baker, shoemaker, dock-labourer, or vagrant. Görki makes them live in his pages, unfolds their psychology, makes us joy with their joys and sorrow with their sorrows, and introduces them—as fellow-sufferers from the all-pervading disease of modern life, *ennui* and dissatisfaction with existing social conditions—into the great human brotherhood.

Görki acknowledges the four literary influences of his life to have been those of the cook on the steamer, of Lanine, of Kaligny and of Korolenko. Of late years he has been forbidden, because of political writings, to enter St. Petersburg or Moscow. Three volumes of his works have already been published, and his stories have found their way through translations into many leading French and German Reviews.

D. B. M.

THE ORLOFF COUPLE

CHAPTER I

ALMOST every Saturday, just before supper-time, the dirty old house of the merchant Petounukoff was the scene of a violent and murderous attack. From the two cellar windows there rang forth into the narrow courtyard, surrounded by old tumble-down hovels, and filled with all sorts of rubbish, the horrible screams of a woman.

"Let me alone! Let me alone! you devil!" she shrieked in a high treble voice.

"Leave go of me then!" answered the tenor voice of a man.

"I won't let go of you, you wretch! you monster!"

"Shut up, and leave go of me!"

"Not if you kill me—I won't let you go!"

"What, you won't? Then take that, you heretic!"

"Help! He is killing me! Help!"

"Will you let go of me then?"

"You may go on beating me, you dog, till you have killed me!"

"I can't do that in a hurry—you take more killing than that!".

At the first words of such a dialogue, the painter Soutchkoff's apprentice, Senka Tschischik, who from one day's end to the other was busy in one of the sheds in the yard rubbing and mixing colours, used to rush out in hot haste, and whilst his little black mouse eyes flashed, he would shout with all his might, so that his voice rang right across the court—

"There's another row up at Orloff's the cobbler."

The little Tschischik was an ardent lover of every sort of adventure and story. As soon as there appeared to be trouble at the Orloffs he would run quickly to the window of their dwelling, lie down on his stomach, poke his mischievous shock head of hair and his thin face, smeared with ochre and vermilion, as far as he could into the gloom of the cellar, and watch with curiosity all that went on in the dark, damp hole, from which arose a smell of musty cobbler's wax and of sour batter. There, on the floor of this hole were to be seen two figures, rolling over each other on the ground, groaning and cursing.

"You want to kill me, then?" gasped at this moment, in a warning, breathless voice, the woman.

"Don't be afraid!" the man mockingly reassured her in a tone of suppressed violence.

Heavy dull blows were then heard, falling on

something soft; then sobs and sighs, and the panting of a man, who seemed to be making efforts to move a heavy object.

"Blast it all! Now he has given her a good one!—with the boot-last," cried Tschischik, watching what was going on in the cellar, whilst the public who had gathered round—the porter, Lewtschenko, the accordion-player Kisljakoff, a couple of tailor's apprentices, and other amateurs of gratuitous amusement,—were all impatient to get news from Senka, and pulled him, now by his legs and now by his many-coloured trousers.

"Well, what's going on now? what's he doing to her this time?" they would ask.

"Now he is sitting astride of her, and is banging her nose into the ground," explained Senka, who with true enjoyment was taking in every action of the play.

The public pushed nearer to the windows of the Orloffs' dwelling. They burned with curiosity to see with their own eyes all the developments of the struggle, and although they knew well of old every point in the attack and defence in the war which Grischka Orloff waged against his wife, they always appeared equally surprised and astonished.

"No, but what a devil he is! He has beaten her again, has he not, till she is bleeding?" asked one of them.

"Her nose is all over blood. . . . It is running down," Senka informed them.

"Ah! good heavens! What a terror, what a wretch he is!" cried some women, full of sympathy.

The men regarded the matter from a more abstract and philosophic point of view.

"He will certainly end by killing her," they said.

The accordion-player remarked in a prophetic voice—

"He'll stick a knife into her some day; you take my word for it. He'll get tired of always knocking her about, and some day will put an end to the whole business in a hurry."

"Now he has let go of her," said Senka in a whisper, springing up from the ground, and bounding on one side like an india-rubber ball. Immediately afterwards he took up another post of observation in a corner of the court, for he knew that Grischka Orloff would now appear above ground.

Most of the spectators went off rapidly, for they had no desire to come face to face with the enraged cobbler. Now that the fight was over Grischka had lost all interest in their eyes, and besides it was not without danger to come across him under these circumstances.

So it happened that when Orloff emerged from his cellar, there was generally, with the exception of Senka, no living soul to be seen in the court-

yard. Breathing heavily, his shirt torn, his hair tumbled, with fresh scratches on his still excited and perspiring face, Grischka Orloff, with bloodshot eyes would glance suspiciously round the court. With his hands behind his back, he would walk slowly towards an old sledge which was leaning against the wall of a dilapidated wool-shed. Sometimes he would whistle and throw threatening glances around, as if he were challenging all the dwellers in Petounukoff's house to battle. Then he would sit down on the sledge, and with the sleeve of his shirt wipe the blood away from his face. He would remain for a long time motionless, glowering darkly at the wall of the opposite house, where the plaster was crumbling away, and where a variety of colours had been smeared on by the house-painter Soutchkoff's apprentices, who had the habit, when they left off work, of cleaning their brushes on this part of the wall.

The cobbler Orloff was about thirty years old. His dark, nervous, finely-cut face was adorned with a black moustache, under which showed full red lips. Above a prominent nose thick black eyebrows were drawn close together; dark restless flashing eyes looked out from under them. The curly hair that hung forward on his forehead fell behind over his brown strong neck in thick ringlets. Orloff was of middle height, a little bent with a slight stoop—the result of his special work,—

muscular and full-blooded; but now he sat on the sledge as if in a dull state of stupor, and gazed blankly at the variegated wall, his breath coming in heavy gasps and throbs.

The sun had already gone off the courtyard, in which there still reigned a dull twilight; a mingled smell of oil-paint, of tar, of sauerkraut and of rotting vegetable matter hung heavy on the sultry evening air. From the windows of the two-storied dwelling there came a sound of song and of oaths, which rang through the court, whilst a drunken man thrust an inquiring head out of a window from behind a corner, looked across at Orloff, and then disappeared with a mocking laugh.

The time came for the painters to leave their work; they passed by Orloff, throwing mocking glances at him, winking meaningly at one another, and filled the courtyard with the sounds of their Kostroma dialect. Then they separated—each going his own way, the one to the bath, the other to the vodka-shop.

Later on, the tailors came down from the second storey into the courtyard; half-dressed, bow-legged fellows who were making merry over the dialect of their painter comrades. The whole court was once more filled with noise, jovial laughter and jokes. Orloff sat silent in his corner, taking no notice of any one. No one went near him, no one dared to

joke with him, for all knew that at these moments he was like a raging animal.

Completely swayed by his dark desperate mood, which seemed to weigh on his breast and oppress his breathing, he sat there as if rooted to the spot.

From time to time his nostrils swelled and his lips parted, showing two rows of big yellow teeth. A dark indescribable feeling of anguish seemed to hold him inexorably; red spots swam before his eyes. A sense of utter melancholy took possession of him, and to this was added a burning thirst for vodka. He knew that he would feel more light-hearted when he had had something to drink, but he was ashamed while it was still light to show his torn and ragged condition in the street, where every one knew him personally as Grigori Orloff the cobbler. He had a feeling of his own dignity, and would not expose himself as a butt for general mirth. But neither could he go home to wash and dress himself,—for there, lying bleeding on the ground, was his wife whom he had greviously ill-used, and whom, at any price, he must not look on at present.

There, no doubt, she is lying groaning, and he feels that she is a martyr, and that he has been a thousand times guilty towards her. All this he realizes quite clearly and distinctly. He knows well that where she is concerned he has much to blame himself, and this consideration increases even more the hatred which he feels towards her. A

vague but dominating feeling of anger gnaws his soul, prevailing over every other feeling, whilst an inconsolable melancholy overwhelms his inmost being, and he gives way consciously to the dull heavy misery which has taken possession of him, but against which he knows no other remedy than —a pint of vodka. . . .

The accordion-player Kisljakoff crosses the yard. He is wearing a velvet tunic without sleeves; a red silk shirt and wide trousers tucked into his stockings; on his feet are smartly-polished shoes. Under his arm he carries in a green bundle his accordion; he has twisted up his black moustache, his cap is worn jauntily on one side, and his whole countenance beams with the joy of living. Orloff liked his brisk liveliness, his cordial ways, and his playing, and he envied him his bright, happy-go-lucky life, free from all care.

"I greet thee, Grischka, proud conqueror, returning blood-stained from the fray!" cried jokingly the accordion-player.

Orloff did not feel angry with Kisljakoff's joke, though he had heard it already for the fiftieth time. He knew that the accordion-player meant no harm, but only wanted to have a little innocent fun with him.

"Well, brother; so you have been acting Plevna again?" Kisljakoff asked the cobbler, as he remained for a moment standing before him.

"Ah! Grischka, you are indeed a melancholy-looking swain! . . . Come along with me to the only place which is of any good to such as you and me . . . we will go and have a drop together!"

"It's too early yet," objected Orloff, without moving his head.

"I shall await thee then with silent longing! . . ." said Kisljakoff, turning away.

After a time Orloff followed him. As soon as he had left, there issues from the cellar a short, plump woman's form. A handkerchief is bound tightly round her head, allowing only one eye and a piece of her cheek to be seen; she walks with tottering steps, leaning for support against the wall, crosses the courtyard, going straight to the place where a short time before her husband had sat, and sits down precisely in the same spot. No one is surprised at her appearance, they are all accustomed to it, and they know she will sit there till Grischka, drunk and repentant, returns from the dram-shop. She has come up into the courtyard, because the air is too heavy in the cellar, and because she will have to guide the drunken steps of Grischka on his return.

The steps are very steep and half broken away; once before, when Grischka returned from the dram-shop he fell down, and sprained his arm, so that he could not work for a fortnight, and she, in order that they might live, had been obliged to pawn everything

they possessed. From that time Matrona had taken good care of him. Sometimes one of the inhabitants of the house would come and speak to her; generally it was Lewtschenko, a retired, bearded non-commissioned officer, a very sensible worthy "Little Russian," with a smooth shaven head and a purple nose.

He would sit down with a yawn and a stretch, and remark—"Well, have you been catching it again?"

"What's that to you?" Matrona would reply in an unfriendly tone.

"Nothing in the world!" said the "Little Russian," and then they both remained silent for a while.

Matrona would gasp; something seemed to be choking her breath.

"What a pity it is to think that you are always at loggerheads with one another! Can't you alter things?" the "Little Russian" would begin again.

"That's our business," replied Orloff's wife shortly.

"Of course it is! Of course it's your business . . ." agreed Lewtschenko, nodding his head to show that he was entirely at one with her on this point.

"What are you driving at?" continued Matrona in an angry voice.

"La! la! la! What a bad temper you are in! You won't let one say a word to you! Whenever I see

you and Grischka, I say to myself, what a pair they are! They worry each other like two dogs! You ought both to be beaten twice a day, morning and evening—then perhaps the desire for quarrelling would be knocked out of you." And he went away angrily and Matrona was glad; for several times there had been whisperings and gossipings in the court, caused by Lewtschenko's attempts to be friendly; so she was vexed with him, as she was with everybody who mixed themselves up with her affairs.

Lewtschenko, in spite of his forty years, walked with a soldierly stride to a corner of the yard, when suddenly Tschischik, the painter's apprentice, ran like a ball between his legs.

"That was a nasty one she gave you, little uncle!" he whispered with a precocious air to the non-commissioned officer, winking cunningly in the direction of Matrona.

"You'll get something nasty from me, if you don't look out! do you understand?" the "Little Russian" threatened him, though he was really laughing behind his moustache. He liked the lively little lad, who knew all the secrets of the court, and he really enjoyed having a gossip with him.

"There is nothing to be done with her," continued Senka, without paying any attention to Lewtschenko's threat, and going on with his revela-

tions. "Maximka, the painter, has also tried—but what did he get for his pains? . . . a box on the ear! . . . I saw it myself. . . ."

The, but half grown, lively little lad of twelve absorbed greedily all the filth and evil with which his life was surrounded, just as a sponge absorbs the water in which it lies; and the delicate wrinkles on his forehead showed that Senka Tschischik had already begun to think.

In the courtyard it grew dark. Overhead was stretched a square patch of dark blue sky on which twinkled the shimmering glory of the stars. The courtyard itself with its steep walled sides looked like a deep pit, at the bottom of which sat, huddled up in a corner, the form of Matrona, resting after the beating she had received, and awaiting the return of her drunken husband. . . .

CHAPTER II

THE Orloffs had been married three years. They had had a child, which died at the age of a year and a half. Neither of them grieved over it much, for they consoled themselves with the thought that they would soon get another one. The cellar in which they lived was a great long, dusty room with a cobwebby ceiling. Close against the door stood, with its front towards the window, a huge Russian oven; between it and the wall a narrow passage led into a square room which obtained its light from two of the windows that looked on to the courtyard. Through these windows the light fell in two dim streaks into the cellar, which was damp, clammy, and death-like in its stillness. . . . Life flowed by somewhere, far, far away out there and above; here, in this hole only vague, dull sounds found an entrance, and blending with the dust of the court, pressed in on the senses of the Orloffs in formless and colourless waves. Opposite the stove stood, behind a brown curtain with a pattern of roses, a great wooden double bedstead;

over against the bed, and near the other wall stood a table, at which the Orloffs drank their tea and ate their dinner, and between the bed and the opposite wall, in a sort of frame formed by two rays of light, the couple sat and worked.

Blackbeetles wandered about, nibbling the paste with which old newspapers had been stuck against the walls. Flies hovered over everything, buzzing in a melancholy drone; and the pictures, which were decorated with the spots they left, looked against the dirty green background of the walls like dark blotches.

The day's work of the Orloffs left nothing to wish for in the way of monotony. Matrona got up at six o'clock, washed herself, and prepared the samovar; this utensil had more than once in the heat of strife, received some hard hits, and was in consequence covered with patches of solder. While the water was heating in the samovar, she had already swept out the room and prepared breakfast. Then she awoke her husband. By the time he was up and washed, the samovar was boiling and hissing on the table. Then they drank their tea and ate their white bread, of which they consumed a whole pound. Grigori was a skilled worker, and never therefore without work. Whilst they were drinking their tea he apportioned out the day's labour; he did the finer parts which required a master hand, whilst his wife's share lay

in twisting the waxed threads, and in finishing off pieces of work which did not require so much skill. They also spoke during breakfast of what they should have for their dinner. In the winter, when the stomach required more, this was a fairly interesting subject, but in the summer when the stove, for motives of economy, was only lit on high days and holidays, and not always then, they lived mostly on cold meats, on kwass, varied with salt-fish and onions; sometimes they boiled, on some neighbour's fire in the courtyard, a piece of meat. As soon as their breakfast was finished they sat down to work, Grigori astride on a log of wood covered with bits of leather, Matrona on a low stool beside him. At first they would work in silence, for what had they to talk about? They might sometimes exchange a few words about their work, and then silence would once more reign for half-an-hour or more. The blows of the hammer fell with a dull sound, the thread squeaked as it was drawn through the tight-stretched leather. Grigori yawned now and then, and after each yawn would close his mouth with a loud noise. Matrona sighed and was silent.

Often Orloff would begin a song; he possessed a powerful metallic voice, and did not sing badly. The words of the song poured forth rapidly and plaintively in a ringing recitative from Grischka's whole chest, or they flowed evenly in loud, strong

wailings, whose melancholy sounds found their way out of the cellar windows into the courtyard. Matrona in a weak soft alto would sing second to her husband. Both faces at such times would wear a thoughtful, sad expression, and Grischka's dark eyes would grow moist. His wife, absorbed in the world of sound, would sit in a half-conscious state, swaying from side to side; sometimes she would appear completely lost in the music, suddenly pausing on a note, and then slowly falling once more into the words of the song her husband was singing. Neither of them felt at such times the presence of the other; they were each pouring forth what seemed to be the whole emptiness and dreariness of their joyless lives, and through the words of the song they were seeking for an outlet for their own half-conscious feelings and thoughts. At times Grischka would improvise—

"Ah! to think of my life, my cursed Li-fe! And the ache in my soul, that cursed ache! Ah! this bitter ache! Ah! this ache and sorrow. . . . !"

But Matrona did not love these improvisings, and she generally asked him—

"Why do you howl then like a dog, when death is about?"

He immediately answered her angrily—

"Thick-headed creature! What do you understand about things — an old scarecrow like you?"

"Oh, howl and howl away, and then bark if you like!"

"Hold your tongue! Am I an apprentice, that you want to begin to teach me now, eh? . . . Just mind your own business!"

Matrona saw that his eyes flashed angrily, and that the veins of his neck were swelling. She was silent for some time, refusing to answer the questions of her husband, whose anger had disappeared as quickly as it had arisen. She turned away her face so as not to meet his eyes, which were full of love and of self-reproach for the cruel words he had just spoken. She heeded not his signals of reconciliation, and though awaiting impatiently his smile, trembled with fear lest he should once more lose his temper over this game which she was playing out with him. But it was pleasant to her to sit opposite to him in this defiant mood, and to watch how he longed to make peace with her; it seemed like living, it awoke feeling and gave an object to her thoughts.

They were both young and healthy, they both loved each other and were proud of each other. Grischka was such a handsome, hearty, strong fellow, and Matrona was a plump little woman with a clear, fair complexion, and warm sympathy in her grey eyes; "a fine little woman" as all the neighbours used to call her. They loved each other, but their life was so monotonous and tedious,

so entirely bereft of all deep interests and outside influences, which might have given them the possibility of diverting occasionally their thoughts from each other, of getting change, which is the natural desire of every human heart, of, in a word—living. It is in fact a psychological fact that man and wife, though they may have attained a high degree of culture, without such an inner life, such an interest, must inevitably grow tired of, and burdensome to each other. If the Orloffs had had an object in life, if it had only been in the empty toil of hoarding halfpence in order to collect capital—life would certainly have appeared easier to them. But as it was, they were deprived even of this interest, which might have proved a bond between them. As each had the other always before his eyes, they had grown to know each other's every movement, every gesture. One day followed the other, and brought nothing into their lives either of change or of excitement. Sometimes on holidays they went to see friends, whose lives were as poor and as empty as their own; occasionally friends came to see them, drank, sang and beat each other. And then would follow an endless succession of monotonous grey days, just like the links of an invisible chain, which made dreary the lives of these people with work, *ennui*, and groundless irritation against each other.

"A regular devil of a life!" Grischka used to

say. "Just as if it were bewitched. Whatever was life given to us for? Work and weariness; weariness and work. . . ." And after he had been silent for some time he continued with a blank look on his face, and with downcast eyes—"Well, it was God's decree that my mother should bear me . . . so it's no use complaining about that! Then I learnt my trade. . . . Why was that? . . . Are there not enough cobblers in the world without me? . . . So then I became a cobbler. . . . And what next? . . . What good fortune is there for me in that? . . . I sit here in a hole and stitch boots. . . . And by and by I shall die. There is what they call cholera in the town. . . . Perhaps it will find us out. . . . Then they will merely say—'There was once a certain Grigori Orloff, who made boots, and who died of cholera.' . . . What sense is there in that? Why is it necessary that I should live, make boots and die? Eh? . . ."

Matrona was silent? she was always upset when her husband spoke in that tone; often she begged him not to talk like that, for it was like speaking against God, who knew best how men's lives should be arranged. Sometimes, when not too depressed, she would interject a remark full of common-sense—"You shouldn't drink vodka, then you would live more happily, and not frighten yourself with such thoughts. Others live and

don't complain; they save money, open a shop, and in time become their own masters."

"Stop talking nonsense, you stupid woman!" Grischka would exclaim angrily. "Just consider a moment how can I possibly live without drink, when that is my only pleasure? You talk about others . . . how many do you know pray, who have been fortunate enough to make themselves independent? Was I not before my marriage quite a different sort of fellow? I will just tell you the truth; it is you who give me so much trouble, and who embitter my life . . . you ugly frog! . . ."

Matrona felt herself wronged when she heard these words. He was certainly right in saying that he was jollier and more amiable when he was drunk. The "others" however of whom she spoke, were a product of her imagination. And that before his marriage he was more cheerful, more entertaining, more good-natured—that also was true. . . . Now however he had really grown like a wild beast. . . . "Am I indeed then such a burden to him?" thought Matrona to herself. Her heart ached at this painful thought—she felt pity for him and for herself. She went up to him looked smilingly into his eyes, and pressed her head tenderly against his breast.

"Just look at that now! She finds time for wheedling me, the little cow! . . ." grumbled

Grischka, pretending to push her away from him. But she knew very well that he would not do so, and pressed closer against him.

Then his eyes would suddenly brighten; he would throw his work on one side, take her on his knee, and kiss her long and passionately; at the same time sighing deeply and low, as if he feared that some one might hear him, whilst he whispered in her ear—

"Ah, Motrja! here we are living like cat and dog together . . . we tear each other like wild beasts; why is that so? . . . It seems to be my fate. . . . Every man it seems is born under a certain star, and that star is his fate."

But this explanation was but poor comfort, and whilst he clasped his wife closer to him, he fell into a dull state of despondency. For a long time they sat thus in the dim twilight, surrounded by the oppressive atmosphere of their cellar. Matrona only sighed and was silent. Sometimes however at these happy moments, the memory of her undeserved sufferings and blows came across her —and she would begin to cry and sob softly. Her gentle reproaches moved him, and his caresses became more and more warm. She however would go on complaining, and make statements which finally exhausted his patience.

"Shut up with your whining!" he cried harshly; "I suffer, very likely, a thousand times more than

you do, when I beat you. . . . Now be quiet, will you? If one gives in the least bit to a woman, she will take advantage of you at once. Leave off reproaching me! What is a man to do whose life is a burden to him?"

Another time, perhaps, his heart would melt under the torrent of her tears, and pitiful complaints. Then he would say humbly and thoughtfully—

"What on earth am I to do, with the unfortunate disposition that I possess? I have hurt you often, that is certain. . . . I know very well that you are the only one in the world who cares for me, though I often seem to forget it. But it's like this, Motrja; sometimes it seems as if I could no longer bear the sight of you . . . as if I had had enough of you for ever. And then, such a rage comes into my soul, as if I could tear you and myself to pieces; and the more you are in the right, the stronger the desire grows in me to beat you."

She did not quite understand what he meant to express; but the contrite, loving tone in which he spoke, touched her deeply.

"God grant that we may both improve; that we may grow used to each other," she said. "Perhaps it would be better if we had a child . . . then we should have something to care for, and to interest us," she continued with a sigh.

"Well then, bring one into the world!"

"How can I bear a child, when you knock me

about so? . . . always striking me on the body and on the loins . . . If only you would give up kicking me so constantly! . . ."

"How can one arrange the exact place where one kicks a person?"

Grischka tried to excuse himself in a grumbling voice. "At any rate I am not a brute! I don't do it for my pleasure, but only when that ache comes over me . . . and I can't help myself then. . . ."

"How is it that that aching feeling comes over you?" asked Matrona gloomily.

"You see, that's my fate, Motrja," Grischka philosophized. "My fate and my disposition. Am I worse than others? . . . Worse, for instance, than Lewtschenko, the 'Little Russian'? Certainly he takes life more easily than I do, and does not know what this ache is. He is alone in the world, and has no wife, no relations. . . . But without you I should certainly die. . . . Yes, that 'Little Russian' is happy enough; he smokes his pipe, and laughs, is lively and contented, the devil he is! . . . But I can't live like that. . . . I certainly was born with unrest in my soul, and have got that sort of disposition. Lewtschenko's nature is just like a straight stick; mine is like a spring; the least pressure on it makes it start vibrating. . . . For instance, I go along the street, and see beautiful things on every hand—and

nothing of it all belongs to me. That makes me feel injured. The 'Little Russian,' he does not need any of those things. But it makes me furious to think how that moustached fellow is so entirely without needs, whilst I . . . ah! I don't even know what I want. . . . I should like to have everything, yes, everything! But I sit here in this hole and work from morning till night, and it all leads to nothing. We sit here together, you and I, you my wife . . . and what is the good of it all? What is there in you to give me pleasure? You are a woman, like all the rest of women. You can offer me nothing new; I know you through and through. I even know how you will sneeze to-morrow. I know it so well, because I have heard you sneeze a thousand times in the same way before. . . . What interest can I find in such a life? That's what is wanting to me—interest in life. Yes . . . and that's why I go to the vodka-shop, because it's more cheerful there. . . ."

"Then why on earth did you marry?" asked Matrona.

"Why?" Grischka asked mockingly. "The devil only knows why! I have often said I ought not to have done so. I ought instead to have joined the ranks of the tramps, where I should have suffered hunger, but I should have been free! Go where you will. . . . The whole world lies open before you!"

"Go then! . . . Set me free!" cried Matrona, with difficulty suppressing a sob.

"Where would you go then?" asked Grischka with angry interest.

"That's my business!"

"Where?" he shouted at her, a wild hatred flashing from his eyes.

"Don't shout so; I'm not afraid of you!"

"Have you already taken up with some one else? . . . Out with it!"

"Just let me go!"

"Where shall I let you go?" Grischka continued to shout.

He tore the handkerchief from her head, and in his fury caught her by the hair. His blows awoke her whole spirit of opposition, and all that was worst in her; and the feeling of this anger gave her real pleasure, thrilled every fibre of her soul. Instead of quenching his jealousy with a few conciliatory words, she fed it all the more, whilst she smiled in his face with a peculiarly meaning smile. His rage grew more and more furious, and he beat her unmercifully.

But in the night, when she, with her bruised and ill-used body, lay groaning by his side, he would watch her from the corner of his eye, and sigh heavily. His conscience troubled him, and he felt a painful feeling of shame, as he realized that there was not the smallest foundation for his jealousy,

and that he had once more unjustly beaten his wife.

"Now then, stop sobbing!" he said in a remorseful tone. "Is it my fault if I have that sort of character? . . . And it's a great deal your fault. . . . Instead of speaking to me quietly, you try and aggravate me. What is it makes you behave like that?"

She did not answer, though she was quite conscious why she acted thus. She knew that she was looking forward to the pitying and passionate caresses with which he would seal her forgiveness. For the sake of these caresses she was prepared to allow herself to be beaten every day till the blood flowed, and she shed precious tears in the sole expectation of this joy of reconciliation.

"How do you feel now? . . . Come now, be quiet, Motrja! Come, my treasure, forgive me? . . . do forgive me now!"

He stroked her hair, kissed her tenderly, whilst he ground his teeth with the bitterness which was eating into his soul.

The window of their room stood open, but the sky was hidden by the thick wall of the neighbouring houses, and in the cellar it was, as usual, dark, damp, and sticky.

"Ah! this life; it's a veritable prison!" whispered Grischka, unable to put into words all the pain that was oppressing his soul. "This hole that

we live in is the cause of it all, Motrja! Whatever do we stay here for? . . . It's just as if we were buried alive!"

"Well, let's go into other lodgings," remarked Motrja through her tears, taking his words literally.

"It's not that, dear. . . . I did not mean that exactly. . . . For even if we were to live in a garret we should still be living in a hole, and all would remain exactly the same! It's not only the lodgings . . . our whole life is like a hole. . . ."

Matrona began to think over his words, and finally remarked, "God grant that we may improve . . . that we may get used to each other."

"Yes, that things may improve . . . you have often said that already. It doesn't look much like it, Motrja. . . . The scandals we create become more and more frequent."

Motrja could not deny this. The intervals between her beatings grew ever shorter and shorter, and Grischka would frequently begin the trouble quite early on Saturday morning. He would commence by saying—

"This evening, as soon as I have finished work, I am off to the vodka-shop across the way, and I mean to have such a bout!"

Motrja blinked her eyes, and was silent.

"Have you nothing to say about it? Well, well! It's better to be silent. . . . It's better for you!" he added threateningly. As the evening hour

approached, he grew more and more excited. He would speak to her over and over again of his intention to get drunk. He knew only too well how painful it was to her to hear such words, and he noticed how she went about in obstinate silence, with a cold glance in her grey eyes, attending to her duties in the cellar; and this made him feel all the more furious.

In the evening Senka Tschischik, the herald of misfortune to the inhabitants of the court, was able to report another battle having been fought at the Orloffs'.

When Grischka had beaten his wife black and blue, he disappeared sometimes for the whole night, not even coming back to the house for Sunday. Finally he would return, dirty, and with bloodshot eyes, to his home. Matrona would receive him in silence, wearing a severe expression, but full of secret pity. She knew that under these circumstances he would like nothing better than a drop of spirits, and already had a bottle of vodka prepared for him.

"Come, pour me out a glass!" he cried in a hoarse voice, and after swallowing two, he would sit down to work.

The whole of that day he would be troubled with pricks of conscience, which often became so severe and painful that he could not bear himself. He would throw down his work, and uttering wild

words of self-reproach would pace up and down the room, or would throw himself on the bed. Motrja would give him time to get over this attack of remorse, and then they would make it up again.

At first these reconciliations were full of much that was tender and sweet, but after a time this delight disappeared entirely, and they simply made it up, because it was impossible to remain a whole week—that is to say, till the following Saturday—without speaking to each other.

"Are you going to destroy yourself, then, altogether with that vodka?" sighed Motrja.

"It's possible," replied Grischka, spitting on one side, with the look of a man to whom it was quite immaterial whether he destroyed himself or not. "And you will end by running away from me? . . ." he continued generally, exaggerating the picture of the future, and looking searchingly into her eyes.

For some time past she had cast down her eyes whenever he had spoken in this way; though at first she had never done so. Grischka, when he noticed this, frowned threateningly, and ground his teeth ominously. As a matter of fact Matrona was just now doing her very best to win back his heart. She visited the fortune-teller's and wise women, and brought back with her all sorts of charms and spells in order to gain this object. When none of these had any effect she paid for a mass in honour of the martyr St. Boniface, the patron saint

against drunkenness; during the whole mass she knelt in a dark corner of the church crying bitterly, whilst her trembling lips moved in wordless prayer.

But ever more and more often her soul became possessed with a cold feeling of hatred against Grischka, which awoke within her dark thoughts. She felt ever less and less pity towards this man, who three years ago, with his joyful laugh and his loving words, had given to her whole life such full delight and pleasure. . . . Thus lived, from one day's end to another, these two children of men, who at heart were neither of them evilly disposed; whilst they waited with fatalistic simplicity for something to happen, which would break into and dispel their present meaningless, and terrible life.

CHAPTER III

ONE Monday morning, just as the Orloffs had finished their breakfast, there appeared on the threshold of their unfriendly-looking dwelling the imposing form of a police-officer. Grischka Orloff sprang frightened from his seat, and catching a glimpse of a startled and reproachful look in his wife's eye, made vain efforts to recall to his dulled brain the events of the last few days. Matrona watched him with looks that spoke of anxious reproach. In obstinate silence, though full of scared expectation, Grischka turned his troubled eyes on the unexpected guest.

"This way! Down here!" cried the police-officer to some one who was coming down behind him.

"It's as dark as a vault here! . . . What a devil's hole is this merchant Petounukoff's house!" The words were spoken in a young, cheerful voice.

The police-officer moved on one side, and, with a rapid step, a medical student in a white coat entered the Orloffs' dwelling, holding his cap in his hand.

His head was smooth shaven, his forehead high and sunburnt; he had cheerful brown eyes, which smiled through his spectacles.

"Good-morning!" he exclaimed, in his still youthful ringing alto voice. "I have the honour to introduce myself to you; I am a member of the Sanitary Commission. I have come to inquire about the state in which you live here, and just to report what sort of air you are breathing. . . . It's quite abominable air!"

Orloff breathed more freely, and a look of relief passed across his face. From the first moment, the medical student, with his boisterous unaffected ways, pleased him; the healthy young face, covered on cheeks and chin with fair downy hair, had something so friendly and good-natured in it. The fresh free laughter of the young man brought into the Orloffs' cellar a ray of light and of brightness.

"Now, my good people," continued the student, after a pause; "you might empty the slop-pail a little more often, for it is from that this horrible smell comes. I should like to advise you, my good woman, to wash it out more often, and to place chloride of lime in the corners of the room. That will purify the air, and it's a very good remedy against the damp. And you, my fine fellow—why do you look so upset?" He turned towards Orloff, seized his hand suddenly, and felt his pulse. The quick assured manner of the medical student im-

pressed the Orloffs to such a degree that they seemed at first to be struck dumb. Matrona smiled constrainedly and watched him in silence, whilst Grigori seemed as if refreshed by the sight of the open fair young face.

"Well, and how are your stomachs feeling?" asked the medical student. "You can speak out openly to me without any fuss—it's a question you see of life and death. . . . If anything is not quite right we will treat you gratis with some simple citrate medicine or something of that sort, and you will be all right in a few days."

"We can't complain; we are fairly healthy," said Grigori, smiling. "And if I don't seem quite up to the mark, it's nothing out of the common—to tell the truth, I took a drop too much last night. . . ."

"That I had already guessed, for my nose told me so. . . . Of course it was only a *small* glass too much? Only half a glass or so? . . ."

Grischka could not contain himself when listening to the comical way in which this was said, and watching the sly grimace which accompanied it; and he burst into a loud good-tempered laugh. Matrona smiled also behind her apron. The medical student, who, at first had laughed with them for company, then changed to a more serious expression. As the lines of his face altered, it appeared even more open and candid than before.

"That a man who is working should drink a glass from time to time—that is all right," said he. "But as I have just said, it must be taken in moderation, and as times are now it is better to keep away from drink altogether. Have you already heard about the epidemic that is just now raging in the town?"

And with a serious expression on his face, he began to tell the Orloffs about the cholera, and the means to be taken to counteract it; trying to express himself as clearly and as simply as possible. Whilst talking, he was busily examining the room, feeling the walls with his hands, looking behind the door, stooping down to peep into the stove, and sniffing about everywhere with his nose. His voice, which had not yet completely changed, alternated between bass and treble, and the simple forms of words which he used impressed themselves unconsciously on the minds of his audience. His brown eyes gleamed, and seemed full of youthful enthusiasm for the work to which he had dedicated himself so earnestly and simply.

Grigori hung eagerly on every one of his words, and followed with curiosity all his movements. Matrona listened also, without understanding very much; the police-officer had already gone off.

"Be careful to use chloride of lime as I have told you. Close by here is a new building; for a couple of kopecks they will give you a whole heap of it.

And, about the drink, it's better to leave it alone for a while, my friend. Well, good-day to you! I shall soon be looking you up again. . . ."

And he disappeared as quickly as he came, and left as it were as a recollection of his pleasant visit, a contented, happy smile on the faces of the couple.

For a time they were silent, both looking at each other, unable to put into words the impression which this sudden visit, with all its revelation of well-directed energy, had made on the monotonous tenor of their dull automatic life.

"Just think, now!" began Grigori at last, shaking his head, "what a sorcerer that fellow is! . . . And they tell us that those are the men who poison people! Can a man with a face like that have anything to do with those sort of goings on? . . . And that cheerful clear voice, and all the rest of it! . . . No, it's all open and above board, it's all straight! He comes in quite simply—'Here I am, my good people; listen to what I have to say!' Chloride of lime, that can't hurt. And citric acid, that's just an acid, and nothing more. . . . The principal thing, however, is to keep clean, to have everything clean indoors, and to attend to the slop-bucket. Can a man be poisoned by attending to those sort of things? They must be stupid folk who talk like that! . . . Poisoners, they call them? Yes, that's it. . . . To think that such a dear fellow as that could be a

poisoner! Pfui!... 'He who works may drink a glass,' he said; 'of course with moderation.' Did you hear, Matrona? Well, pour me out one, then. Is there one left?"

Matrona hastened to pour him out a glass of vodka, which she produced from some hiding-place.

"He is really a very nice fellow; there is something so friendly about him," she said, still smiling at the thought of the student. "But who can say what the others may be like? Perhaps they are indeed hired to——"

"What do you mean? . . . Hired to do what?" roared Grigori.

"Well, to put folk out of the way.... It seems there is an order that all the poor people are to be poisoned when there are too many of them," added Motrja.

"Who told you that?"

"Well, everybody says so.... The painter's cook says so also.... And lots of others say the same thing."

"A lot of silly fools! What would the Government gain by it? Just think a moment! First they would have to treat us all with medicine; and then they would have to pay for the funerals, the coffins, the graves, and all that sort of thing. That all costs something, and it all has to come out of the coffers of the State. . . . That's all

idle chatter; if they really want to get rid of a few of the poor people, they have only got to send them out to Siberia; there's room for them all there; or to some uninhabited island, where they can dig the ground, work and pay taxes! Can't you understand? Don't you see that would be the right sort of way of thinning out the people, and would be at the same time advantageous. . . . For an uninhabited island produces nothing; but workers, who pay taxes, are the most important matter for the State coffers. But what sense would there be in poisoning people and burying them? . . . There would be no sense in it, don't you see? And then about the medical students; they are certainly a troublesome lot, but more especially because they are always in opposition to the authorities, than because they poison people. . . . No, you won't catch a medical student doing that, not for all the money in the world! . . . One can see at once that these students are not that sort."

The whole day they talked of the medical student, and of the advice he had given them. They spoke of his cheerful laugh, of his expression, and they remembered that there was a button missing on his coat. But on the question as to whether it was missing on the right side or the left, they could not agree; and they nearly came to pulling one another's hair over it. Twice already

Grischka had made his wife angry, but he noticed in time that her bottle still contained a good drop of vodka; so in the end he gave in to her. They made resolutions to commence cleaning up their cellar the next day, and then began once more to talk of the student, whose entry into their home had acted on them like a refreshing breath of fresh air.

"By heavens, but he's a regular jolly lad!" said Grigori delighted. "He comes in as simply as if he had known us for years, gives the necessary directions, and there's an end of it. . . . All without noise or fuss, though he had a right to use authority. . . . That's the sort of fellow that takes my fancy! One sees at once that he has a heart for people like us. . . . What say you, Motrja? They don't want us to die, that's all about it! And all this women's chatter about poisoning and that sort of thing—that's all rubbish. 'How are your stomachs getting on?' he asked. If he wants to poison me what can it matter to him how my stomach is? And how cleverly he explained all that. . . . What the devil did he call those—those worms that get into our insides?"

"'Bactery,' or some word like that," answered Motrja, with a sneer. "But he only told us that to frighten us, so as to make us more careful about being clean. . . ."

"Who knows, perhaps it is true! Perhaps there

are animals of that sort—in the damp all kinds of creatures live! Damn it all, what was the name of those little beasts? Bac—bactery—that was not quite it. . . . If I could only pronounce it! . . . It's just on the tip of my tongue, but I can't get it out! . . . "

Once again, in the evening when they lay down to sleep, they spoke about the event of the day with the most naïve excitement, just as children have the habit of chattering with each other about some strong impression they may have received. And they fell asleep in the middle of the conversation.

In the morning they woke up early. At their bedside stood the painter's stout cook; her usually healthy, rosy-coloured face was now white and leaden-looking.

"How is it you are still in bed?" she began at once in an excited voice, speaking with trembling lips. "The cholera has started here in the courtyard! The Lord has visited us . . .!" and she began suddenly to sob aloud.

"What nonsense! It can't be true!" cried Grigori in a scared voice.

"And I forgot again last night to carry out the slop-bucket!" said Matrona with contrition.

"I have come in to say good-bye to you, my dear friends," said the cook. "I have decided to leave, and go back to my village."

"Who is in for it?" asked Grigori, jumping out of bed.

"The accordion-player. He drank last evening some cold water from the pump, and in the night he was taken with dreadful cramps."

"The accordion-player?" muttered Grigori. It seemed to him quite incredible that any sort of illness could hurt that strong fellow. Yesterday only he crossed the yard as cheerful and as proud as a peacock.

"I shall just go and see what is going on," said Grischka, still smiling incredulously.

"But it is catching, Grischka!" screamed Matrona, horrified.

"What do you want to be doing there, man? Stay here!" cried the cook.

Grigori muttered a few curses, and began to dress himself hastily without washing, and went out just as he was into the yard.

Matrona caught hold of him by the shoulders to hold him back; he felt how her hand trembled, but he shook her off against her will.

"Get away, or something will happen!" he shouted out, pushing her back, and he strode out by the door.

The courtyard seemed empty and quiet. . . . Whilst Grigori walked towards the accordion-player's room a feeling of fear took possession of him; but this was followed by an immediate sense of

satisfaction that he should be the only one in the house who had the courage to visit the sick man. This feeling increased when he noticed that the tailor's apprentices were watching him from the windows of the second-floor. In order to appear quite free from fear he whistled as he went along. At the door, however, of the accordion-player's room he met with a slight surprise. He was not the first to visit the sick man; Senka Tschischik was there before him. Senka was just sticking his nose through the crack of the door, and observing in his usual fashion, with intense curiosity, all that was going on in the room. He did not notice Orloff's approach till the latter took him by the ear.

"Just look, Uncle Grischka, how the cramps have got hold of him!" he whispered, lifting his dirty little face, which, under the impression of what he had just been witnessing, seemed more sharp-set than ever. "How parched and dried up he looks. . . . By Jove! he looks like a dry cask!"

Orloff was quite overcome by the pestiferous atmosphere which was issuing from the room. He stood there silently, listening to Tschischik, whilst watching with one eye through the narrow crack of the partly open door.

"We ought, perhaps, to give him some water to drink, Uncle Grigori," said Tschischik.

Orloff glanced at the excited, nervous, trembling

face of the child, and felt within himself the desire to help the sufferer.

"Be off, quick, and get some water!" he ordered Senka. Then he opened wide the door of the sick man's room, and stepped boldly across the threshold.

Through the mist, which seemed to have arisen before his eyes, Grigori saw poor Kisljakoff. The accordion-player, dressed in his best clothes, leant all of a heap against the table, pressing convulsively his body against the edge, which he held with both his hands. His feet, still wearing the patent leather boots, dangled helplessly on the damp floor.

"Who is there?" asked the sick man in a hollow, apathetic, changed voice.

Grigori moved a step nearer, treading carefully over the damp boards, and trying to speak in even cheerful tone of voice.

"It is I—brother Mitri Pawlow. . . . What's the matter with you, then? This is a queer sort of music you are making here! Did you have a drop too much yesterday?"

He looked at Kisljakoff with terrified curiosity, for he scarcely recognized him. The accordion-player's face had taken on it a drawn angular expression; the cheek-bones stood out sharply. The deep-sunk eyes, surrounded by black rings, looked unusually fixed and staring. The skin had turned the colour of a corpse in summer-time. Orloff felt

he was looking into the leaden face of a dying man. Only the slow movement of the jaws showed that what was before him was still a living body. . . . For some time Kisljakoff stared with motionless, glassy eyes into Grigori's face; and this dying stare frightened Orloff. It seemed to him as if a damp, cold hand had seized him by the throat, and was slowly strangling him. And he felt within him the desire to leave as soon as possible this room, which used to be so pleasant and gay, but which now seemed unnaturally cold, and filled with such a horrible foul smell of decay and rottenness.

"Come now," said he, preparing to leave the room.

Suddenly a sort of change passed over the grey face of the accordion-player. The lips, which were tinged with a leaden-coloured shade, opened, and he said in a low monotonous voice—

"I—must—d—die."

These three words, uttered so apathetically, struck Orloff's head and heart like three dull strokes. He turned, as if stunned, towards the door, where he was met by Tschischik, hot and perspiring, who was returning with a bucket of water.

"Here's some water from Spridinoff's well! . . . They did not want to let me take it, the dogs!"

He placed the bucket on the ground, disappeared quickly into a corner of the room, and re-appeared

with a glass, which he handed to Orloff. Then he went on chattering—

"They said we had cholera here. Well, I said, what does that matter? . . . It will come to you, too—it's going all round the town. Then I got a box on the ear. . . ."

Orloff took the glass, filled it from the bucket, and drank it off in one draught. In his ears still rang the words of the sick man—

"I—must—die."

Tschischik wriggled about the room like an eel; he seemed to be quite in his element.

"Give me water," moaned the accordion-player, leaning his trembling body forward on the table.

Tschischik ran up to him and held a glass of water to his black, swelled lips. Grigori stood as if spell-bound or in a bad dream, leaning against the wall near the door. He heard how the sick man gulped down the water, and how Tschischik asked him if he should undress him and put him on the bed; and then he heard once more the voice of the painter's cook. He could see her fat face glancing with an expression of mingled fear and pity from one of the windows of the courtyard, as she said in a whining tone—"Mix two table-spoonfuls of soot with pine-juice and rum, and give it to him."

Some one whom he could not see, but who stood

behind her, recommended cucumber-pickle and aqua regia.

Orloff felt suddenly with a clear flash the strong silent voice of his soul speaking. In order to strengthen the flickering flame, he rubbed his forehead briskly; then he left the room suddenly, ran across the yard, and disappeared down the street.

"Oh, Lord! . . . The cobbler's taken ill now! . . . He's run off to the Infirmary!" cried loudly the cook.

Matrona stood near her, with wide-open eyes, and trembling in her whole body.

"You're a liar!" she said angrily, though her white lips could scarcely pronounce the words. "My Grischka could not catch this filthy complaint. He'd never give way to it."

But the cook was not listening to her; she had already gone off somewhere else, talking excitedly as she went along. Five minutes later quite a crowd of neighbours and passers-by had assembled before the merchant Petounukoff's house. There they stood, whispering together under their breath, and on each of their faces one could read the same feeling of terror, nervous excitement and hopeless misery—mixed with secret rage on the part of some, and of fictitious boldness on that of others. Tschischik ran backwards and forwards between the courtyard and the sick man's room, bringing each time to the curious crowd of onlookers some

fresh piece of news about the condition of the accordion-player.

The crowd stood tightly pressed together, and filled the dusty, foul-smelling air of the street with its half-uttered whispers. From time to time a loud oath from some undistinguishable quarter was heard; an oath as senseless as it was malicious.

"Look there; there's Orloff coming!"

Orloff drove up on an ambulance-van covered over with a white awning, which stopped at the door of the old house. He was seated by the side of the driver, a dark-looking man, who was also dressed in white linen.

"Make way there! Get out of the way!" shouted the driver of the carriage, in a deep bass voice to the bystanders.

He drove right into the midst of the crowd, so that they scattered to right and left, falling over each other. The sight of the ambulance-van, and the rough voice of the driver, both helped to calm the excited feelings of the onlookers, and many of them left their posts of observation. Close behind the driver was to be seen the medical student, who had the day before visited the Orloffs. His hat was on the back of his head, big drops of perspiration stood out on his forehead. He wore a long, dazzlingly white coat, in front of which a big hole had been burnt out with some strong acid.

"Now then, Orloff! Where's the sick man?"

asked the student in a loud voice, throwing a critical glance at the bystanders, who were loitering about in small knots, partially concealed behind the corners of the gates.

"Look out! There's the cook coming," cried some one.

"Take care, or he'll cook you something you don't like!" replied a second voice in a vicious tone.

The would-be wit, who is always to be found in a crowd, shouted out, "Just wait; he'll cook a broth for you that won't agree with your stomach!"

The crowd laughed, but it was a mirthless laugh, a mixture of fear and of distrust.

"They don't seem to be afraid of the infection themselves. . . . That's rather difficult to understand," some one in the crowd remarked, with a meaning look, but in a voice that betrayed hatred. Under the impression of this question the faces in the crowd took on once more threatening expressions, and the conversation fell to low whispers.

"Look, they are bringing him out now!"

"Orloff is carrying him! Just look what a bold fellow he is!"

"It's true, he has plenty of courage."

"What does it matter for a sot like him? What has he to be afraid of?"

"Carefully, carefully, Orloff! Lift his legs higher

. . . that's right. Are you ready? . . . Drive on, Peter!" the student ordered. "Tell the doctor I will follow him directly. . . . I beg of you, Mr. Orloff, to stay here for a time and help me to disinfect the place. . . . You might take this opportunity of learning what to do in case of necessity some other time. Is it agreed? Yes?"

"We can set about it at once," said Orloff with visible pride, glancing round at the crowd.

"I will help too!" cried Tschischik.

He had followed the ambulance-van up to the door of the Infirmary, and had already returned in time to offer his services to the medical student. The latter looked at him over his spectacles.

"Who are you, my little chap?"

"I am the apprentice here at the painter's," replied Tschischik.

"And you are not afraid of the cholera?"

"I . . . afraid?" replied Senka, astonished. "I am not afraid of anything in the world."

"Is that so? . . . Well, that's all right. . . . Just listen now, my friends."

The student sat down on a barrel which stood in the yard, and, whilst he rocked himself backwards and forwards on it, he began to explain to Orloff and Tschischik how, before everything else, they must be scrupulously clean in their own persons.

A few minutes later Matrona, smiling anxiously,

joined the group in the courtyard. The cook followed her, wiping her tear-stained eyes with a damp apron. One by one the crowd followed, approaching the group where sat the student, with furtive steps as a cat might approach a sparrow. After about a dozen people had collected, the student became more enthusiastic and interested, for he observed the increasing attention paid to what he was saying. Standing in their midst, and gesticulating as he spoke, he gave a sort of lecture, raising by turns a laugh, or calling forth an expression of distrust.

"The principal thing, gentlemen, in all cases of illness is cleanliness in your own persons, and good fresh air," thus he instructed his listeners.

"But those who keep clean manage to die all the same!" remarked one of the audience.

"Ah! dear Lord!" sighed the painter's cook out loud. "It would be better to pray to the holy martyr St. Barbara to save us from a sudden death!"

Orloff stood near his wife, and though apparently occupied with his own thoughts, watched the student with a fixed stare. Suddenly he felt some one pull his sleeve.

"Little Uncle Grigori!" whispered Tschischik in his ear, standing on tiptoe, and looking at the cobbler with small round eyes that glowed like burning coals. "The poor Mitri Pavlovitch is

going to die. He has no relations—what will become of his accordion?"

"Keep quiet, you little imp!" Orloff replied, and pushed him on one side.

Senka looked in at the window of the room from which they had just carried out the accordion-player, his eyes searching round with a covetous glance.

"Well, as a final word of caution, my friends, use plenty of chloride of lime!" the student's voice was heard once more saying.

CHAPTER IV

TOWARDS the end of this disturbed day, whilst the Orloffs were sitting at tea, Matrona asked her husband in a tone of curiosity, "Where did you go just now with the student?"

Grigori seemed to be looking at her as through a mist, and he poured his tea from the cup into the saucer without replying.

Towards mid-day, after they had disinfected the accordion-player's room, both Grigori and the sanitary officer had gone off together. On his return, Grigori had remained for nearly three hours in a silent, thoughtful mood. He had lain down on the bed, and had remained there till tea-time, his face turned up towards the ceiling, without speaking a word. In vain had Matrona tried, over and over again, to begin a conversation with him. He did not once swear, even when she worried him. This was quite an uncommon occurrence which gave her much cause for thought.

With the instinct of the woman whose life is absorbed in that of her husband, she guessed at

once that something new had come between them. She felt alarmed, and was all the more curious to find out what had really happened.

"Come, arn't you feeling very well, Grischka?" she began once more.

Grigori gulped down the last drop of tea from his saucer, wiped his moustache with his sleeve, handed the cup to his wife, and said with a dark frown, "I was with the medical student, up at the Infirmary."

"What, in the cholera hospital?" exclaimed Matrona, in a scared voice; and then added, terrified, "Are there many folk there?"

"Fifty-three people, counting the one they brought from here."

"You don't say so?—and——"

"About a dozen are getting better, they can already walk about; but they are quite yellow and thin."

"Are they really cholera patients . . . ? Or have they been changed for others?—so that the doctors might be able to say they had cured them?"

"You stupid goose!" cried Grigori roughly, throwing an angry look at her. "What a lot of foolish people you are, all of you! It is ignorance and stupidity, nothing else! One can stick here all one's days in blind ignorance—understanding nothing!"

He pulled the cup of tea, which Matrona had just poured out for him, violently towards him, and was silent.

"I should like to know where you get all your great wisdom?" said Matrona mockingly.

Orloff did not pay the least attention to her words. He grew as silent as before, and appeared quite unapproachable. The samovar was nearly extinguished, only a simmering sound escaping from it. There came into the windows from across the yard a smell of oil-paints, carbolic, and dirty slops. This smell, blending with the twilight of evening, and the monotonous singing of the samovar, awoke in the narrow close cellar a sensation, which lay with the weight of a night-mare on its occupants. The black ghastly mouth of the stove seemed to look at them menacingly, as if about to devour them. For a long time the Orloffs sat there in silence, nibbling sugar, gulping down mouthfuls of tea, and fidgeting with the tea-things. Matrona sighed, and Grigori drummed with his fingers on the tea-table.

"I never saw such cleanliness as reigns there!—never saw anything like it!" Grischka broke in suddenly on the silence.

"Every one of the attendants wears white linen clothes; the sick people have baths as often as it is necessary—and they get wine to drink at five and a half roubles a bottle! And the food! . . .

The smell is almost enough for one; it's so delicious! There is such care—such attention! —no mother could be kinder to a child. Yes, yes! when one comes to think of it! Here we live, and not a soul bothers his head about us, asks us how we are, or how we are getting on; —whether we are happy or unhappy—whether we have anything to put in our mouths or not. But as soon as it's a case of dying, then they can't do enough for one, they will go to any expense. These infirmaries, for instance—and the wine—five and a half roubles the bottle! Don't the fellows reason then, what all that is going to cost them? They had better have spent it in helping the living every year a little."

Matrona did not trouble to try and follow what he was saying. It was sufficient for her that his thoughts had taken a new direction, and that now her relations with Grigori would be on a different footing. She was quite convinced that this would be the result, and foresaw only too quickly what the consequences of this spiritual change would be to her. Fear and hope moved her, together with a feeling of enmity against her husband.

"They'll know very well what to do without you," she said ironically, drawing down the corners of her mouth.

Grigori shrugged his shoulders, glancing askance at her; then continued to speak in still more

meaning tones, this time watching her attentively.

"Whether they know it or not that is their business. . . . But if I have to die without seeing something of life, then I shall be the first to whom such a thing happens! . . . Understand then, this time of torment must come to an end! I won't sit here any longer, and wait till the cholera comes to me as it did to the accordion-player, and carries me off to the grave. No, I won't, I can't! I would rather go boldly and meet it. . . . Peter, the student, said to me—'If Fate is against you, just show that you also can oppose Fate. You can but try which is the stronger. . . . It's simply a battle—nothing more.' You ask what is the matter with me? . . . I mean to go as an attendant in the Infirmary! do you understand? . . . I will crawl right into the jaws that threaten, and they may swallow me up, but at least I will defend myself with my hands and my feet! . . . I shan't be so badly off there; I shall get twenty roubles a month, besides tips, and my keep. It's just possible that I shall die there; but that might happen here! . . . At any rate it's a change in one's life."

He struck the table with his fist in wild excitement, so that the tea-things clattered and danced.

Matrona had listened to him at first full of

curiosity and disquietude, but towards the end she interrupted angrily.

"The medical student has been advising you to do this, hasn't he?" she asked in a meaning voice.

"Haven't I my own reason to go by? Can't I take a decision for myself?" answered Grigori, evading a direct answer.

"Well!—and what am I to do meanwhile?"

"What are you to do?" asked Grigori, astonished. He had not once thought about this side of the question. The simplest way, of course, would be for him to leave his wife in their old lodgings. But wives are not always trustworthy, and he had not entire confidence in his Matrona. She required, according to him, a good deal of looking after. Struck by this thought, Grigori continued sullenly—

"The most simple thing would be for you to remain here. I shall always get my wages, and that will keep you. Hm!—yes," he said, apparently anxious to hear what she would reply to this.

"It's all the same to me," she answered quietly.

And once more he noticed cross her face that woman's smile, which seemed to him to possess a double meaning, and which had so often before awoke in him a feeling of jealousy. It aroused his anger now just in the same way, but he knew how to control himself, and said abruptly, "It's all nonsense, all that you say!"

He looked at her irritably, full of expectation of what she would reply. She however was silent, but continued to annoy him with the same provoking smile.

"Well!—what's to be done?" asked Grigori at last in a higher key.

"Yes, what's to be done?" replied Matrona indifferently, drying the teacups.

"You had better not play me any tricks, you serpent!—you had better not, or you will get one over the head!" raged Orloff. "It may be I am going to my death!"

"Well, don't go then—I don't send you," replied Matrona quietly.

"Anyhow, I know that you are glad I am going," continued Orloff with a sneer.

She was for once silent. This silence aggravated his rage, but he controlled himself so as not to destroy this moment of resolution by a horrid scene of wife-beating.

And suddenly there entered his mind a thought, which appeared to him more diabolical than the aggravating mood of his wife.

"I feel certain you want me to be underground," he said, "but just wait a little—we'll see who gets there first!—yes, that we will! I'll do something that will settle your business, my good woman!"

He jumped up from the table, took his cap in his

hand, and hurried out. Matrona remained behind alone. She was dissatisfied with the result of her manœuvres, and upset by his threats. With a steadily growing feeling of fear, she thought about the future. She looked out of the window and whispered softly to herself, "Oh! Lord God! King of heaven! Holy Mother of God!"

She sat for a long time at the table, filled with terror-stricken presentiments, trying in vain to guess what was really the matter with Grigori. Before her stood the clean tea-things. The setting sun threw a great streak of light across the massive wall of the neighbour's house, which stood opposite the window of their room; the whiteness of the wall reflected this light, causing it to fall straight across the cellar and sparkle on the glass sugar-basin standing in front of Matrona. She watched with wrinkled brow this glimmer of light till her eyes grew tired. Then she rose, put the tea-things away, and lay down on the bed; she was feeling anxious and heavy-hearted.

When Grigori returned it was already dark. She could tell by the way he walked that he was in a good temper. He did not swear at the darkness of the room, but called Matrona by her name, and then went up to the bed and sat down on it. Matrona raised herself and sat by his side.

"Guess what's the latest news!" began Orloff, smiling.

"Well, what is it?"

"You are going to take a situation also."

"Where?" she asked with stammering lips.

"In the same Infirmary as I shall be in," he explained in an impressive tone of voice.

She fell on his neck, pressed him closely to her breast, and kissed his lips. He did not expect this and pushed her away. "She is only pretending," he said to himself. "The cunning creature, she does not really want to be with me! She thinks me a fool, the little serpent!"

"Well, why are you so pleased about it?" he asked in a rough voice that was full of distrust. He would have liked to have pushed her off the bed.

"I am only so pleased," she said, smiling happily.

"Don't try and humbug me; I know you!"

"My dear brave knight!"

"Shut up—or I'll give you something!"

"My dear, dear Grischanja!"

"Just say straight out what you want from me!"

Finally, when her endearments had appeased him a little, he asked her anxiously—

"Are you not frightened then at all?"

"But we shall be together!" she answered at once simply.

It was pleasant to him to hear her say this, and he replied gratefully—

"You are indeed a plucky little wife!"

Then he pinched her till she screamed.

CHAPTER V

DURING the first days of their service, the Orloffs found an immense deal to do. Many sick people were daily brought to the Infirmary, and the two novices, who were only accustomed to the tedious weariness of their former life, felt at first very uncomfortable in the midst of this rapid, pulsating, busy rush into which they were suddenly thrown. They lost their heads, and failed to understand at once the orders that were given them; whilst they became confused with all the different impressions that poured in upon them. And though they had the firm intention of making themselves useful, running hither and thither full of zeal, they succeeded nevertheless in doing very little work, and too often got into the way of other people. Grigori felt more than once that he had indeed deserved a reproof for his clumsiness, but to his astonishment no one took it upon them to reprove him.

One of the doctors, a tall dark man with a black moustache and a hooked nose, with an enormous wart over his right eyebrow, told Grigori to help

one of the patients into the bath-room; the new attendant, eager to be useful, seized hold of the patient with such a show of zeal that he called out and groaned.

"Take care, my man! Don't break him in two!" said the doctor quite seriously. "We've got to get him into the bath-room whole. . . ." These words confused Orloff. The patient, however, a long thin fellow, smiled constrainedly, and said in a hollow voice—"He doesn't understand yet . . . he's a new hand. . . ."

The head doctor, an old gentleman with a pointed grey beard and great flashing eyes, had told the Orloffs when they first came into the Infirmary how they should manage the patients, and what they had to do under certain circumstances. At the end of his instructions he asked them if they had taken a bath lately, and then gave them out white aprons. The voice of this old gentleman had in it something pleasing and sympathetic, and the Orloffs felt they should like him. But half-an-hour afterwards they had forgotten all his instructions in the noisy rush of work in the Infirmary.

People in white clothes ran up against them; commands which were carried out with lightning speed by the attendants, sounded in their ears; the patients groaned, sobbed and sighed; water flowed splashing and hissing from the taps; and

this blending of sounds seemed to fill the air, which was already saturated with sharp unpleasant smells that irritated the nose; and it seemed to Orloff that every word of the doctors, every sigh of the patients, was impregnated with the same smell.

At first all this appeared to him like a wild chaos, in which he could never feel at home, but which worked on him increasingly in a depressing, bewildering way. But after a few hours he was seized by the strong current of energy which flowed through everything. He pricked up his ears, and felt a burning desire to get into the swim, and learn how to do all these things that others were doing; joined with the feeling that he would be lighter-hearted and happier if he could be swept away in this whirlpool.

"Corrosive sublimate!" shouted one of the doctors.

"Some more hot water in the bath over there!" a thin little student with red eyes ordered.

"Look here! What's your name?"

"Orloff."

"All right! . . . Just rub this patient's feet . . . yes, that's right . . . so. . . . I see you understand at once. . . . So—o . . . not so hard! or you will rub his skin off! . . ."

"Oh! how tired I am!" exclaimed another student, long-haired and pock-marked, whilst he was giving Orloff the necessary instructions.

"They have brought in another patient!" some one exclaimed.

"Orloff, just go and see! . . . Help them to bring him in."

Grigori, full of zeal, followed out all the directions. He was covered with perspiration, there was a ringing in his ears, and a mist swam before his eyes. At times the consciousness of himself disappeared entirely under the mass of impressions which crowded in upon him at every moment. The dark-green rings round the glassy eyes of the patients, their leaden-coloured faces, their bones, which stood out from their bodies, their clammy, bad-smelling skins, the horrible convulsions of the half-dead bodies, all this oppressed his heart painfully, and produced a nausea which he had never experienced before.

Once or twice he had caught a hurried glimpse of his wife in the corridor of the Infirmary; she seemed in these few hours to have grown thinner, and her white face wore a troubled look.

"Well, how are you getting on?" he asked during one of these hurried encounters. She could only answer with a smile, and disappeared immediately.

A thought struck Grischka, which he however kept to himself; was it really so necessary for him to have brought his wife with him into this hell? She might catch the infection and die. . . . The

second time he met her he called out to her in a loud voice—

"Be sure and keep yourself clean; wash your hands very often, and take every care!"

"Why do you say all that? What if I don't take care?" she asked, showing her little white teeth; and it seemed to him as if she were defying him.

Her reply made him angry.

"There she is," he thought, "joking even in such a place as this! What a parcel of fools these women-folk are!"

He found however no further opportunity to give her recommendations. Matrona, having noticed the angry look on his face, hurried away to the women's side of the building.

A minute later Grigori was helping to carry into the mortuary the body of a policeman who had been well known to him. Only two days before he had seen the policeman at his post, and had sworn at him as he had passed by; they had never been on good terms together. And now he saw this man, such a short time before so strong and healthy, lying dead, and quite disfigured with convulsions. The corpse swayed backwards and forwards against the bearers, and stared with wide-open glassy eyes.

Orloff realized the whole force and cruelty of the contrast. "Why does one ever come into the

world?" he thought to himself, "if such a horrible complaint as this can knock one over in four-and-twenty hours?"

He glanced at the bier, and felt a movement of pity for the dead policeman. What would become now of the three children of the dead man? Last year he lost his wife, and there had scarcely been time for him to marry again . . . now the poor little creatures would be left orphans entirely. . . .

This thought filled him with a feeling of real pain. Suddenly the left arm of the corpse began to stretch out and to straighten itself, and at the same time the mouth of the dead man, which till then had stood open, and drawn down on the left side, closed itself.

"Stop a moment," said Orloff to the other bearer; and he rested the bier on the ground. "He is still alive!" he whispered in a terrified voice.

The bearer, who had been helping him to carry the stretcher, turned round, looked at the corpse attentively, and then said angrily to Orloff—

"What nonsense you are talking! Don't you understand that he is getting himself ready for his coffin? Don't you see how the cholera has twisted him up? . . . He can't lie in the coffin in that position! . . . Come! Let's get on again!"

"But just look; he is still moving!" protested Orloff, trembling with horror.

"Hurry up now! Catch hold, you fool! . . . Don't you understand what I say, then? . . . He *has* to move in order to relax his limbs! Are you then such an ignorant and stupid chap? . . . *He* alive? . . . How can any one say that about a corpse? That's mutiny, brother! . . . All our corpses here move, but I should advise you to be quiet about it. Don't tell a soul that he has moved! Otherwise one will tell his neighbour, and his neighbour will add a little bit on to the story, and we shall soon have a regular row up at the Infirmary, because they will be saying we bury them alive! The whole mob would come here and pull everything to pieces. . . . And you would get your share of the knocks! . . . Do you understand? . . . We will put him down there to the left."

The quiet voice of Pronim—that was the name of the other attendant—and his soft way of speaking, calmed and reassured Grigori.

"Just keep a level head, brother! You will soon get used to it all. There is no harm going on here. . . . The feeding, and the management, and everything are first-class. . . . We have all to die some day, every one recognizes that. But till that time comes, keep, as I have said, a level head! . . . Will you have a glass of schnapps?"

"Why not?" replied Orloff.

"I have got a drop in the corner there, ready for

use on these sort of occasions. What do you say; shall we have a go at it?" They went off accordingly towards a quiet corner of the Infirmary, and pulled themselves together with a small glass of spirits. Then Pronim dropped some essence of peppermint on to a piece of sugar, and handed it to Orloff.

"Take it; otherwise they will smell that we have been drinking. They are very particular here about vodka; they say it is bad for one."

"And you? . . . have you got accustomed to the life here?" asked Grigori.

"I should think so! I was one of the first to come. Hundreds have died before my eyes. One lives here indeed in a state of uncertainty, but otherwise, to tell the truth, it's not bad . . . it is God's work,—just like the Red Cross in war. Have you heard of the Red Cross ambulance work, and of the nurses and sisters? I saw them in the Turkish war. . . . And I was also at Ardahan and at Kars. They were indeed a brave lot, those ambulance people! Full of kind-heartedness and courage. We soldiers had at least our guns and cannons; but they went about among the bullets as if they had been walking about in some pleasant garden. And when they found either one of us or a Turk—they brought them all to the place where the doctors were dressing the wounds, and stood near, whilst all around them the bullets were flying

. . . sch! . . . sch! . . . Tju! . . . Fit! . . . Often some poor chap would be hit by a ball just at the back of the neck,—ping! . . . and there he would lie. . . ."

This conversation, added to the drop of vodka which he had drunk, put Orloff into a more cheerful frame of mind.

"If I were to tell A, then I should also have to tell B," he consoled himself with thinking, whilst he rubbed the feet of a patient. "As the ale is drawn, so it must be drunk."

Behind him some one was begging in a plaintive voice—"Give me water! . . . Give me something to drink . . . for the love of . . ."

Another one called out, his teeth chattering with cold—"Oh! . . . Och! . . . Hohoho! . . . hotter still! . . . It does me good, doctor! Christ will reward you! . . . Give me some more hot water. . . ."

"Just pass the wine over here!" called out Doctor Wasschtschenko.

Orloff listened, full of interest, whilst he did his own work, to all that went on around him, and it began to dawn upon him that it was not all so meaningless and chaotic as it appeared to him at first. This was no chaos reigning here, but powerful, conscious, active strength. It was only when he thought of the police-officer, that a cold terror took possession of him, and he threw a scared

glance out of the window towards the mortuary where the dead man lay. He really did believe at heart that the police-officer was dead, but at times horrid doubts shot through his mind. Suppose the dead man were to suddenly jump up and shout! And he remembered how some one had told him once that those who had died of the cholera broke out of their coffins, and, so it was said, ran about after each other. As he went backwards and forwards at his work, rubbing the limbs of one patient, helping another into a bath, everything seemed to be seething and turning round in his brain. He thought of Matrona; what was she perhaps doing at this same moment? Sometimes he felt a fleeting wish to see her at once, if only for a minute. But immediately this was succeeded by another thought; —"After all, she's all right here! . . . It's good for her to have to move about; the fat little lump. . . . It won't hurt her to get a bit thinner . . . perhaps then she won't be so stupid. . . ."

He could not get rid of the thought that Matrona was nourishing hidden desires in her breast, which were not flattering to his own manly vanity. He went to the length of acknowledging to himself that she certainly had every right to be discontented with her past life, and it was possible she might long for some sort of change. The fact of his acknowledging this much to himself was the cause of his mistaking his doubts as to her loyalty

for the truth; and as a result of his jealousy he asked himself the question—"Why did I want to leave my cellar, and get into this kettle of hot water?" . . . But all these, and other thoughts, stirred and whirled deep down at the bottom of his soul, they had no influence on his work, and they were driven into the background by the ceaseless attention which he bestowed on all that went on in the Infirmary. He had never in his life seen men work as did these doctors and medical students, and more than once he thought, as he looked into their drawn faces, that they indeed more than earned their salaries.

As soon as Orloff was off duty he went, though he could hardly keep on his legs, into the court-yard of the Infirmary, and lay down close to the wall, under the window of the dispensary. His thoughts seemed all scattered; near his heart he felt a dull, throbbing pain, and his legs were heavy with fatigue. He seemed to have no more strength left either for thought or desire, but stretched himself out at once on the turf, and stared up towards the sky, which was filled with the many-coloured cloud-glories of the setting sun. He dropped asleep at once, half-dead with fatigue.

He dreamt that he and his wife were the guests of Doctor Wasschtschenko—in a great room, around which stood elegant Viennese chairs. On these chairs sat all the patients from the Infirmary. In

the middle of the room the doctor began to dance the Russian national dance with Matrona, whilst Grischka himself played on the accordion and laughed light-heartedly, for the doctor's long legs were quite stiff at the joints, and he stepped in a dignified way like a heron on a bog, by the side of Matrona. And the patients sitting round all laughed also, and swayed uncertainly on their chairs.

Suddenly there appeared at the door the police-officer.

"Aha!" he cried out in a gloomy threatening voice. "You thought I was dead already, brother Grischka! Here you are playing on the accordion . . . but you sent *me* into the mortuary. . . . So now then, get up with you, and come and follow me!"

Trembling in his whole body, and covered with perspiration, Orloff awoke, and scrambled up from the ground, whilst Doctor Wasschtschenko stood watching him reproachfully, and remarked—

"Just listen to what I've got to say to you, my friend; if you want to go to sleep you have your own bunk there in the Infirmary! Haven't they shown you where it is? What sort of an attendant do you call yourself, if you go and lie here on the ground with nothing over your body? . . . If you get an inward chill, and knock up and die (which God forbid), what's going to happen then? That's

not the way to behave, my friend. . . . Why you're shivering now . . . come along with me, and I will give you something for that. . . ."

"I was so dead tired," muttered Orloff in a low voice, making excuses for himself.

"So much the worse! You'll have to take care. . . . It's a dangerous time just now, and we need you here very much."

Orloff followed the doctor quietly through the corridors of the Infirmary, swallowed in silence a small glass of medicine, which was handed to him, then drank another; finally made a grimace and spat on one side.

"That's right . . . and now go and have a good sleep. . . . Good-day to you! . . ."

The doctor strode with his long thin legs down the corridor, and Orloff stood watching him. Suddenly a smile lit up the attendant's whole face, and he ran after the doctor.

"Thank you so much, doctor."

"What for?" asked the doctor, standing still.

"Why, for the work that I have got here! I will do all I can to please you, for I like being here in all this bustle . . . and you said just now you needed me . . . so I thank you specially for that, with all my heart. . . ."

The doctor watched with surprise the joyful, excited face of the new attendant, and smiled in a friendly way.

"You're a queer sort of fellow! But it's all right . . . you take it the right way. . . . There is something straightforward in what you say. Come then . . . do your work well. But not for my sake; do it for the sick people. . . . It's like a field of battle here; we have to save the sick from the jaws of disease; do you understand? Well then, help us with all your strength to conquer. Now then, be off and get some sleep!"

Orloff was soon lying in his bunk, feeling a pleasant sensation of pride at being on such a confidential footing with a person like the doctor. He was only sorry that Matrona had not overheard the conversation. But he would tell her about it to-morrow. She would scarcely believe it, the fat little lump that she was. . . . Busy with such pleasant thoughts Grigori fell asleep.

CHAPTER VI

"COME and drink your tea, Grischka." With these words Matrona awoke her husband the next morning.

He lifted his head and looked at her. She was smiling pleasantly at him; her hair was brushed, and looked glossy and neat, whilst her white dress gave her a smart, clean appearance.

It pleased him to see her thus, but immediately afterwards the thought glanced through his brain that the other men in the Infirmary might also find pleasure in looking at her.

"What's the matter? . . . Tea's ready? . . I'll have my tea here! . . . Where do you want me to go and get it?" he asked, with a frown.

"Come, we'll drink our tea together," she proposed, looking at him with her grey smiling eyes.

Grigori turned away, and replied in a curt voice that he would come directly.

As she left the room he stretched himself once more in his bunk and began to brood.

"Yes . . . she calls me to tea . . . and is as

pleasant as possible! She has grown thinner too in these last few days. . . ."

He felt pity for her, and would have liked to have prepared an agreeable surprise for her, perhaps to have bought some cakes or something of that sort to eat with their tea. But whilst he was washing he put these thoughts away. . . . "Why should he spoil his wife? . . . She could get on very well without it!"

They drank their tea in a small bright room, the two windows of which looked out on to the open fields. The gilded rays of the morning sun lay on the floor. Dew still sparkled on the grass under the window. Along the distant horizon could be just seen through a light opal morning mist the trees that bordered the high-road. The sky was cloudless, and a fresh smell of grass and of damp earth was wafted in at the open windows.

The table stood just between the two windows, and three people sat down to it; Grigori, Matrona, and a companion of the latter, a tall, thin, middle-aged person, with a pock-marked face and good-tempered grey eyes. She was called Felizata Jegorovna, and she was a spinster and the daughter of a college superintendent. She could not drink the tea provided by the Infirmary, and so used her own samovar. All this she told Orloff in an excited cracked voice; she invited him hospitably to take a seat near the window, and to refresh himself

with the "magnificent air of Heaven," whilst she disappeared somewhere for a time.

"Well, were you very tired yesterday?" Orloff asked his wife.

"I should rather think so," Matrona replied in a lively tone of voice. "I could scarcely feel my legs under me, and my head was swimming. I moved about at last as if I were half dead, and could scarcely hold on till I was released from duty. . . . I was praying all the time to the Lord that He would be merciful to us."

"How is it, then? Don't you feel afraid here?"

"What, of the sick people?"

"Of the sick people . . . or of anything else. . . ."

"I am only afraid of the dead. . . . Do you know," . . . she bent down towards him and whispered in a scared voice—"they still move after they are dead . . . it's true, on my soul!"

"I know that . . . I have seen it myself!"

Grigori continued with an ironical laugh—"The police-officer Nazaroff nearly gave me a box on the ear as he lay on the stretcher. I was carrying him to the mortuary, and all of a sudden he let out with his left hand. . . . I only just escaped it . . . it's true!"

Grischka was in the best of tempers. Taking his tea in this bright clean room, from which could be seen endless distances of green fields and blue sky, pleased him immensely. And there was

something else too which caused him pleasure—something which radiated, as it were, from his own personality. He felt the desire to show the best side of his character, and at the same time to appear in Matrona's eyes as the hero of the hour.

"I shall make this my life work . . . Heaven itself shall rejoice at it! I have my own special reasons for doing so. . . . The people here, I tell you, are such as one seldom meets in the world. . . ."

He told her now of his conversation with the doctor, and whilst he unconsciously exaggerated a little, he worked himself into a still pleasanter frame of mind.

"And then the work itself, too," he continued. "You see, my dear, it's a holy work . . . it's a sort of war. On one side stands the cholera, and we stand on the opposite side . . . who is going to prove the stronger? We have to sharpen our wits to see that nothing is neglected. . . . What is this cholera after all? . . . We must first understand that clearly, and then we must use all means possible to fight it. . . . Doctor Wasschtschenko said to me, 'We need you, Orloff, in this business. Don't let yourself be frightened. Continue to rub the feet and the stomachs of the patients,' he said, 'and I will rub their insides with my medicines. . . . And so we shall thoroughly get the better of the disease, you will see, and the patient will recover,

and will thank us for restoring him to life.' . . . Think of that; you and I together, Matrona . . . you and I!"

He swelled his chest out with a feeling of pride, and looked at Matrona with sparkling eyes. She smiled back at him, but did not reply. He looked so handsome whilst he was speaking, and reminded her so of the Grischka whom she used to know in their early married life.

"On the women's side also every one is so zealous and so good!" she said, after a pause. "There's that lady doctor with the spectacles, and all the nurses, they are all first-rate people; they talk to one so simply, so that one understands at once what they want done."

"Then you are contented also?" asked Grigori, when his enthusiasm had cooled a little.

"I should rather think I was contented! Lord! yes! . . . just reckon up! . . . I get twelve roubles, and you get twenty. . . . That makes thirty-two roubles a month! And our keep besides. . . . What a lot we shall be able to save if the cholera lasts right on into the winter! . . . Then we shall be able . . . at last . . . please God . . . to get out of that hole of a cellar! . . ."

"Hm! . . . Yes, we can think about that, . . ." said Orloff thoughtfully; and after a few moments he tapped Matrona on the shoulder, and continued, with a ring of hope in his voice, "Ah, Matrona,

perhaps the sun of happiness may yet shine upon us! . . . We won't lose courage, will we?"

She also was filled with enthusiasm.

"Yes, if you would only keep sober," she remarked after a few moments' pause, in a doubtful tone.

"Don't talk about that now; that will depend entirely on circumstances. . . . Once our lives become different, then my habits will alter."

"Please God that may indeed happen!" sighed Matrona from the bottom of her heart.

"Well, don't say any more about it!"

"Dear Grischenka!"

They separated, experiencing quite new sensations towards each other. They were full of joyful courage, and firmly resolved to put forth all their strength, so as to succeed in their new work. Three or four days passed, and Orloff had already earned several words of praise for his quickness and zeal. At the same time he remarked, however, that the other attendants were envious of him, and were trying to make mischief, so that he had to be constantly on his guard. This awoke in him a feeling of enmity, whereas, before that, he had been good friends with Pronim. The secret and open enmity of these fellow-workers was really a pain to him. "The jealous brutes," he thought to himself, and ground his teeth together. "But I'll get the chance some day of paying them back in their

own coin!" Unconsciously his thoughts travelled to Matrona—for he could talk over everything with her. She would not envy him his success, and would not, like this fellow Pronim, burn his boots with carbolic acid.

Each day brought the same busy rush, just as Orloff had experienced at first. But it was now no longer so fatiguing to him, for he got more accustomed to it every day. He had learnt to distinguish the smells of the different remedies, and as often as possible he refreshed himself with the smell of the ether, to which he had taken a great fancy. He had observed that the smell of ether was as exciting to him as was a good glass of vodka. He understood quite quickly now the doctors' orders; it was only necessary for them to show him by signs what had to be done. He was chatty and pleasant, and knew how to divert the attention of the patients, and this pleased increasingly the doctors and students. All the impressions which in his new occupation pressed in upon him, worked together to elevate his feelings, and to increase his own self-respect. He felt within himself a lively desire to do something great, so that the attention of all should be directed to him, and that every one should be astonished. It seemed almost as if he had now for the first time become conscious that he was a human being, and as if he felt the need to prove this to himself and others by some heroic deed.

Filled with this unaccustomed ambition, Orloff undertook various venturesome deeds, in the hopes of distinguishing himself in the eyes of onlookers. For instance, he would carry alone, without waiting for the help of another attendant, some heavy patient from his bed to the bath-room; he did not shrink from attending to the most filthy among the cholera patients, seeming to despise the possibility of infection, and treating the corpses with cynical indifference.

But even all this did not satisfy him. He still longed to do something greater, something more out of the common. This unappeased longing caused him pain, and brought back his former moodiness, and as he had no one else with whom he could speak, he opened his heart to Matrona.

One evening when they were off duty, and had had their tea, they went out into the fields together. The Infirmary stood some way out at the back of the town, in the midst of a green far-stretching plain, bounded on one side by the dark edge of the forest, and on the other by the soft outline of the distant town. Towards the north the field extended into the far distance, and faded into a dim blue horizon; on the south it was bordered by the deep ravine-like banks of the river, which ran through the country roads, shaded on either side by trees planted at regular intervals The sun was just

setting, and the golden crosses of the church-towers of the town, rising above the dark green of the gardens, flashed in all their brilliance against the background of the sky, and reflected golden rays. The windows also of the houses flashed back the red glow of the sunset. Music could be heard in the distance. From the dense ravine, sown thickly with the débris of the fir-trees bordering the river, an aromatic scent arose, whilst the evening wind brought from the forest in caressing waves a mingling of spicy perfumes. A soft, sweetly melancholy, yet intense feeling, lay over the whole wide expanse.

The Orloffs walked silently through the fields, breathing delightedly the fresh air, which, in contrast with the atmosphere of the Infirmary, seemed to them more than ordinarily pleasant.

"Listen! there's a band! . . . Is it in the town or up at the barracks?" Matrona asked in a low voice of her husband, who seemed to be sunk in thought.

She did not like him to brood in this sort of way by himself. He appeared to her at such moments strange and far away. They had seen but little of each other these last few days, so that the moments now when they were together, seemed to her all the more precious.

"A band?" asked Grigori, as if waking out of a dream, "the devil take such music! . . . You

should just listen to the music which is ringing through my soul. . . . That's the right sort of music! . . ."

"What sort of music are you talking about?" said Matrona, looking anxiously into his eyes.

"I don't know myself what sort. . . . I can't describe it to you, and if I could you would not understand. My soul seems in a sort of glow. . . . I should like to go forth, far, far away. . . . I should like to put forth my whole strength. . . . Ah! I feel within me such boundless strength! . . . If for instance this cholera would change itself into a man, into a giant, into Ilja Murometz himself, for instance . . . then I would wrestle with him, and we would see who would conquer! . . . Thou art strong, and I, Grischka Orloff, am also strong . . . we will see which is the stronger of the two! . . . And I would overcome him, even if I myself lost my life in the struggle. . . . They would erect a cross to me there in the green fields, 'To the Memory of Grigori Andrejeff Orloff . . . who freed Russia from the Cholera.' . . . That's all I should want!"

His face flushed, and his eyes flashed whilst he was speaking.

"My dear brave one!" whispered Matrona, and pressed tenderly against him.

"I would throw myself against a hundred sharp knives if I could do any good. . . . Do you under-

stand that? . . . Not for my own profit, but to make men's lives happier. . . . I see there such people as the doctor Wasschtschenko and the student Chochrjakoff; the work they do is quite wonderful. One would think they would have died long ago from absolute fatigue. . . . Do you think they work for the love of money? No man would work like that for money only! The head doctor has plenty of his own . . . he needs no more . . . he is a rich man already. . . . When he was ill lately, Doctor Wasschtschenko watched by him for four days and nights; not once did he go home during the whole time. . . . Money plays no part in all this; they do it out of pity . . . they are sorry for the people, and so they sacrifice themselves . . . And for whom? . . . For everybody . . . as much for Mischka Ussoff as for anybody else. . . . They took as much pains to get him better as they did about the others, and they were quite rejoiced when he got better. This Mishka, if he had his deserts, should be in penal servitude, for every one knows that he is a thief or something worse! . . . Yet they were quite rejoiced when he got out of bed for the first time, and laughed aloud for pure joy! . . . I should like to feel such happiness also; I am full of envy when I see how glad they are, and I grow hot with the desire to do as they do. But how am I to begin? . . . Ah! 'tis a devil of a business! . . ."

He made a hopeless gesture, expressive of his despair, and once more sank into profound reflection. Matrona was silent, but her heart beat rapidly. The excited state of mind of her husband made her feel vaguely anxious. She felt distinctly in his words the burning pain which oppressed him during his, to her, incomprehensible fits of depression. She loved her husband; and it was a husband she needed, not a hero. . . .

They approached the steep banks of the river, and sat down near each other on the grass. Above them nodded the feathery tops of the young birch-trees. Down below, over the water, lay a blue mist, reeking of rotting leaves, of pine-needles, and of damp earth. Backwards and forwards a light breath of wind swept over the ravine; the tops of the young trees moved softly, and the whole forest seemed filled simultaneously with a shy whispering, as if some beloved person were asleep under the shelter of its trees, and it feared to wake him. The stars shone down from above, and the lights flashed from the town, having the appearance, against the dark background, of gardens of gay quivering flowers. The Orloffs sat on in silence. Grigori drummed with his fingers on his knee, whilst Matrona watched him and sighed softly.

Suddenly she put her arms round his neck, laid her head against his breast, and whispered—

"Grischenka, my dear one, my loved one! How

good you have grown towards me, my dear brave lad! . . . We are living now just as we did when we were first married—you never say a bad word to me. . . . You talk to me, and open your heart to me. . . . Not once have you scolded me. . . ."

"Are you already longing for something of that sort? If so, I will give you a thorough good beating," he said jokingly, whilst he felt for her in his heart nothing but sympathy and tenderness. He stroked her hair softly, and experienced a real pleasure in giving her these fatherly caresses. Matrona appeared to him at this moment as a child. She sat on his knees, and nestled soft and warm against his breast.

"My dear, dear one!" she whispered.

He breathed deeply, and words poured from his mouth, which were to her, and to himself, full of new meaning.

"Ah! my poor little girl! . . . Little coaxing thing! You see now, you have no one nearer to you in the world than your husband! And you look at me always with such a frightened glance out of the corner of your eye. If I have hurt you now and then, it was because I was suffering from this ache, Motrja! We lived in our hole . . . we saw no sunlight, we knew no one. Now I have got out of the hole, and am among human beings. How blind I was to the world and to life! . . . Now I understand that a wife should be a man's

best friend, the friend of his heart, so to speak. For men are vicious and cruel. . . . They are always trying to harm one another. . . . There's this Pronim Wasioukoff! . . . devil take him! . . . We won't talk of that, Motrja. We shall be all right in time, and we won't lose courage! We will live in a human way, and reasonably, won't we? . . . What do you say to that, you dear little goose?"

She was crying. Tears rolled down her cheeks, as she realized the happiness which he pictured to her; and she only replied with kisses.

"Ah! my only loved one!" he whispered, returning her caresses. Clinging tenderly together, they sat there and kissed the salt tears from each other's cheeks. And for some time Orloff continued to speak in the same new tone. . . .

It had become quite dark. Countless stars lit up the evening sky, which looked down with triumphant sadness on the earth. The plain all around them was as peaceful as the heavens above.

CHAPTER VII

THEY had grown into the habit of taking their early tea together. The morning after their conversation in the fields, Orloff appeared in his wife's room with a gloomy, disturbed expression on his face. Felizata had been ill. Matrona was alone in the room, and received her husband with a radiant smile. She was surprised, however, on seeing his expression, and inquired anxiously—"What is the matter then? are you ill? . . ."

"I have nothing the matter with me," he replied dryly, sitting down on a chair, and drawing towards him the cup of tea which she had poured out.

"What has happened then?" . . . Matrona waited for an answer.

"I have not slept at all, I have been thinking all the night. We were really much too silly yesterday, much too weak with one another. I am ashamed of it now; that sort of thing leads to no good. . . . Women profit by such weak moments to get the better of their husbands. But don't you imagine you will succeed in that way. . . . You

won't get over me. . . . That is all I wanted to say to you!"

He repeated all this with a certain emphasis, but without looking at her. She, on the contrary, never took her eyes off him.

"You are sorry then that you were yesterday so good and so kind to me?" she asked in a low voice, whilst her lips trembled painfully. "You regret then that you kissed and caressed me? It is terrible for me to hear this, very terrible. . . . Your words cut me to the heart. What do you want to do then? Am I already a burden to you? . . . Don't you care for me any more?"

She looked at him searchingly as she spoke these words, and her voice was bitter and defiant.

"I did not mean that," said Grigori confusedly. "I only spoke in a general way. . . . We lived together in our cellar . . . you know yourself what a life it was! Already the recollection of it even, pains me. . . . Now we have crept out into the light, and . . . I feel half frightened. . . . The change all took place so quickly. . . . I seem to be a stranger to myself . . . and you also seem to be changed. . . . What does it all mean? . . . What will happen next?"

"What will happen next? That's as God wills, Grischka!" said Matrona in a serious tone. "I only beg this of you; don't regret that you were so kind to me yesterday."

"All right . . . say no more about it!" Grigori interrupted her in the same gloomy voice. "You see, I have slept over it, and I feel sure there is no good to be got out of that sort of thing. Our former life was indeed thorny, but our present one is not full of roses. . . . Though I don't drink, nor fight, nor beat you . . . still there is . . ."

Matrona laughed hysterically. "You have no time for such things now!"

"I could soon find time if I wanted to go in for that sort of thing," said Orloff, smiling. "But, somehow, I don't understand why, I don't want to do so. Besides . . . I don't know . . . I feel so queer somehow or other. . . ."

He shook his head slowly, and stared fixedly before him.

"God only knows what's the matter with you," said Matrona, sighing deeply. "You get on very well here, even if you have plenty of work. The doctors all like you, and you behave so well. . . . What's the matter with you then? tell me . . . It seems to me you are too restless."

"That's it . . . I am too restless! . . . For I was thinking the whole night of what Peter Ivanovitch, the student, said lately. He says that all men are equals. . . . Well—am I not a man like any other? . . . And yet this Doctor Wasschtschenko, for example, is better than I am, and Peter Ivanovitch is better, and many others also. I can see for

myself that I am not their equal. . . . I can feel that I am not worthy to hand them a glass of water. They cured Mischka Ussoff, and they rejoiced at doing so . . . and I cannot understand that. I cannot see what reason there is for rejoicing at a man's recovering from illness! . . . Life is often worse than cholera pains, if you look facts straight in the face. They know that as well as I do, and yet they rejoice. . . . I should like to be able to feel the same sort of joy as they do; but I cannot, for, as I have already said, I can't see any cause for rejoicing. . . ."

"It is because they feel pity for mankind," Matrona interrupted. "And such pity! . . . It's just the same on the women's side of the Infirmary. If one of the patients gets better . . . good heavens, what a fuss is made about her! . . . When the time comes for her to leave they help her with advice, and give her medicine and money. . . . I am often moved to tears when I see it. . . . They are indeed good people, and are filled with compassion!"

"You talk of shedding tears, but it only makes me wonder . . . fills me with astonishment! . . ."

He shrugged his shoulders, and rubbed his forehead, looking all the time at his wife with a puzzled expression.

Suddenly she began to talk eagerly and rapidly, striving to prove to him that mankind indeed

deserved to be treated pitifully. Leaning forward, and looking tenderly into his face, she talked long and earnestly, about mankind, and the heavy burden of life it was called on to bear. He, however, only watched her, thinking to himself—"Just see how they can talk when they like, these women! Where on earth did she get all these words from?"

"You, yourself, also have a pitiful heart," she said. "I have heard you say you would like to destroy the cholera if only you had strength enough. Why then should you want to destroy it? According to what you have just said it does more good than harm. As far as you are concerned it does you no harm—quite the reverse. . . . Have you not been better off since we had cholera in the town?"

Orloff burst out laughing.

"That's true! that's true! It has certainly been all the better for me that the cholera came! Devil take it! The people are dying all around like flies, and I am all the better off because of it! . . . Ha! . . . ha! . . . ha! . . . That's the way of the world! It's enough to drive one mad to think about it!"

He rose from his chair, and went off to his work; still laughing. As he went along the corridor the thought crossed his mind again, that it was certainly a pity no one could hear Matrona's wise talk.

'How cleverly she said it all! . . . Though she is only a woman, yet she speaks quite sensibly!"

He started work, still under the impression of this pleasant thought; though the moans and groans of the patients fell on his ears the moment he entered the ward.

Every day the world of his sensations enlarged, and at the same time there grew within him the need of expressing what he thought and felt. It is true he was not yet in a position to formulate all that was going on within him, and give clear expression to it, for the greater part of his impressions and thoughts he was not yet able to understand himself. More especially was he pained by the consciousness that he was not able, like other people, to rejoice over the good fortune and well-being of others. There grew within him, however, daily the desire to do something great, something out of the common, and thereby attract the attention of the whole world. His position in the Infirmary seemed to him to be an awkward one; he felt himself to be between two stools. The doctors and medical students stood above him, the attendants beneath him; he was not the equal of either. A feeling of loneliness came over him, and it appeared to him as if fate, in order to make a sport of him, had torn him away from his own place, and were whirling him about like a feather in the wind. He felt pity for himself, and sought

out his wife in order that she might console him. This he did often against his will, for he had an idea that his candid outspokenness might lower him in the eyes of Matrona. But he continued to confide in her all the same. He would go to her usually in a dark, angry or cynical mood, and would leave her feeling consoled and comforted. Matrona knew just the right words to use. She had no great command of language, and her words, to some, might have appeared weak, but they were inspired by conviction, and Grigori observed with surprise that she obtained more and more influence over his inner life, that his thoughts turned increasingly towards her, and that he felt more constantly the need of opening his heart to her.

Matrona also quickly realized what she had become to him, and tried constantly to strengthen her growing influence over him. Without her being conscious of it herself, her busy useful life in the Infirmary had sensibly increased her own self-respect. It was not in her disposition to reflect over the past or to grumble about things, but when she thought of her former life in the dark cellar, of its narrow round of cares, of her husband and of her trade, she, in spite of herself, could not help contrasting that past with her present condition; and the dim pictures of her former existence melted into an ever more and more distant and misty background. The authorities at the Infirmary

valued her because of her quickness and willingness, and every one behaved kindly to her. Being treated as a human being was such a new experience to her, that her spirits rose, and her enjoyment of life was heightened.

Once, when she was on night duty, the stout lady doctor began to question her about her former life. Matrona told her everything quite openly, and without constraint; then she ceased suddenly, and smiled a curious sort of smile.

"Why do you smile?" asked the lady doctor.

"I can't help smiling when I think how bitter my life was. . . . You will scarcely believe me, but I had no notion then how sad and bitter it was. . . . It is only now that I begin to understand."

This looking back on her past life roused a new feeling in Matrona's breast against her husband. She cared for Grigori as much as ever, and showed him all the tenderness of a loving wife; but it appeared to her at the same time that Grigori was guilty toward her. Sometimes when talking to him she would adopt almost a protective tone, for his constant restlessness made her feel sorry for him. Now and then a doubt arose in her mind as to whether it would ever be possible to lead a quiet, peaceful life with him, though she still held steadfastly to the belief that Grigori would, in the end, settle down, and throw off his despondency.

According to the ordinary course of events they

ought gradually to have grown accustomed to each other, and reconciled to their everyday life in common. They were both young, strong and industrious, and many in a similar position would have been contented to go on from day to day, leading the grey, cheerless life of the ordinary worker—the life of poverty, alternating with starvation—their energies completely absorbed in the task of providing their daily bread. But this ordinary existence was rendered impossible by the unrest which Grigori carried in his heart, and which prevented him from reconciling his inmost soul with the monotony of a daily task.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE dreary September morning the ambulance-van drew up in the courtyard of the Infirmary, and Pronim lifted from it another victim of the epidemic, a yellow-faced, emaciated, half-dead little lad in motley clothes, stained with many colours.

"Another case from Petounukoff's house!" said the driver of the van in answer to a question as to the quarter from which he had brought the new patient.

"Tschischik!" cried Orloff in a tone of pain. "Good heavens! it is Senka. Little imp, don't you recognize me?"

"Yes, I do," said Tschischik with an effort, as he lay on the stretcher, turning up his eyes to catch a glimpse of Orloff, who was standing behind him.

"Ah! you merry little bird! How did this happen?" asked Orloff. He was quite upset at the sight of the lad, who was completely exhausted with the painful disease.

"Why could it not spare this innocent child?"

he cried out, shaking his head slowly, and as if concentrating in this cry all his tense horror.

Tschischik was silent, and shivered from head to foot.

"I am so cold!" he said, as they laid him on the bed and took off his ragged, paint-stained clothes.

"We'll soon pop you into a nice hot bath!" Orloff promised him. "We'll make you well again in a hurry."

Tschischik shook his head.

"No, Uncle Grigori. . . . I shall never be well again," he whispered in a dead voice. . . . "Bend down towards me . . . I stole the accordion . . . it is hidden under some wood in the woodshed. . . . The day before yesterday . . . I played on it for the first time. . . . Oh! what a beauty it is! . . . Directly after I had these pains in my stomach. . . . They were a punishment for the sin. . . . Give it back, Uncle Grigori. . . . The accordion-player had a sister. . . . Ah! . . . A . . . ah!"

His whole body shook and twisted with violent cramps. All they could do was done for the little lad, but the weakened body was unable to guard the spark of life. That same evening Orloff carried Tschischik's body to the mortuary. He felt as if he had himself received a blow or an injury. He tried to straighten out the little body, but could not succeed in doing so. He left the place with a stunned feeling, in a dark, melancholy mood, with

the image of the once bright and cheerful, but now so frightfully disfigured boy, constantly before his eyes.

He had the oppressive consciousness of his own helplessness when face to face with death. How much trouble and care he had lavished on poor little Tschischik, and how anxious the doctors had been to cure the lad! . . . But in spite of it all he had to die! . . . It all seemed so unjust! . . . He himself also, Grigori Orloff, would have some day to pack up his traps in the same way, leaving nothing behind. Then all would be over. A shudder ran through him, and he immediately experienced a feeling of loneliness, of being forsaken. He felt the need of talking to some understanding person about it all. He had often tried to get a long talk with one of the students, but no one here had time to philosophize. So there was nothing for it but to talk to his wife. In a heavy, oppressed mood he sought out Matrona.

She was just off duty, and was washing herself in a corner of the room. The samovar stood ready, simmering and steaming on the table.

Grigori sat down in silence, and looked at Matrona's bared, round shoulders. The samovar boiled up, and spurted drops of hot steam around. Matrona also splashed the water about with her washing. In the corridor outside, the attendants' footsteps could be heard hurrying backwards and

forwards, and Grigori tried to guess, from the sound of the steps, who was passing. Suddenly it seemed to him as if Matrona's shoulders were as cold and as damp with perspiration as was the body of the little Tschischik, as he tossed about on his bed in the agony of cholera cramps.

Grigori shuddered, and said in a low voice—

"Senka is dead. . . ."

"Dead! . . . Senka dead? God rest his soul!" exclaimed Matrona piously, scarcely pausing in her noisy ablutions, and spluttering the soapsuds from mouth and nose.

"I feel sorry for the poor child," said Grigori in a sad voice.

"But he was a mischievous lad, though," Matrona interjected.

"Well, leave him in peace now he is dead and gone! It's not our business what he was when alive. . . . I am truly sorry he is dead! He was such a quick, bright boy! The accordion . . . hm! . . . He was indeed a sharp lad! Sometimes the thought used to cross my mind that I should like to have him to teach,—not exactly as an apprentice. . . . He was an orphan, he might have got attached to us, and have taken the place of a son. . . . I fear we shall never have children! . . . I don't understand why. Such a strong, hearty woman as you are, and yet you bear no children. . . . You had one, and there was an end of it! . . .

Ah! if we only had a couple of little squallers, I believe our life would not be so tedious. . . . As things are, I work and work, and what is the end of it all? Just to provide daily bread for you and me! . . . And why do we need daily bread? So that we may be able to work. . . . And so life goes round in a circle without sense or meaning. . . . If we only had children they would change our life entirely . . . yes, entirely . . ."

All this was said in a fretful, dissatisfied tone of voice, his head sunk on his breast. Matrona stood listening to all he had to say; but growing gradually paler and paler.

"I am strong and healthy; so are you," continued Grigori; "and yet we have no children. What is the reason? . . . I think and think about it till I get quite melancholy, and take to drinking in sheer desperation!"

"What you are saying is not true!" said Matrona in a firm loud voice. "You are not speaking the truth! Never dare to repeat to me what you have just said! . . . If you take to drink, it is only your own dissipated habits that prevent your keeping away from it. My not having children has nothing to do with it! That idea is false, Grigori!"

Grigori was stunned by her words. He rose and leaned against the back of his chair, watching his wife, and scarcely recognizing her. Never before had he seen her in such a rage; looking at

him with so much pitiless anger in her eyes; never before had she spoke with such fierce strength.

"Go on! . . . Go on! . . ." said Grigori defiantly, whilst he clutched the back of the chair. "I should like to hear what else you have got to say!"

"You shall soon hear! . . . I should never have said what I have just said, if you had not reproached me so unfairly! You tell me I do not bear you children! . . . Very well! . . . Never will I bear you a child. . . . I have no wish to bear one to you, after the way you have treated me!"

Her voice broke with sobs, but she almost screamed the last words.

"Stop that noise!" said her husband in a severe voice.

"Would you like me to remind you why I have no children? . . . Just remember, Grischka, how you have always ill-treated me, and constantly kicked me about the body! Just reckon up the blows and knocks you have given me, the times you have tortured me! How often have you made the blood flow? My clothes were often soaked with blood. And it's your cruelty, my dear husband, that has prevented my having children! . . . And now you reproach me with it? . . . Are you not ashamed to look into my eyes, you murderer—you? . . . Yes, you are a murderer, for you have killed your own children! And now

you want to lay the blame upon me! . . . upon me, who bore everything, who forgave you everything! But these words I can never forget or forgive; to my dying hour I shall remember them! . . . Did you imagine then that I did not, like other women, long for children? Did you think I did not wish to have any? . . . Many and many a night, when I lay sleepless, I have prayed the good God to save the child in my womb from you . . . you murderer! When I see some other woman's child, I could cry with envy and bitterness, because such happiness is denied me. . . . Ah! Holy Virgin! How often have I wished that Senka were my child! How I would have cared for him! . . . And then, notwithstanding all this, for you to reproach me with not bearing you a child! . . ."

She had grown breathless, and the words poured incoherently from her lips. Her face was congested, and showed red patches under the skin; she trembled and clutched her throat, which was choked with sobs.

Grigori sat white and troubled, still holding on tightly to his chair; watching with wide-open eyes this woman, his wife, but who seemed now a stranger to him. He was afraid of her . . . he was afraid she might seize him and throttle him. She seemed to threaten him with her flashing angry eyes. At this moment she was immeasurably his

superior; he felt it and feared her accordingly. He could not jump up and strike her, as he would have done formerly, for he could not help being overawed by the moral and mental force, which seemed to make of her a new being.

"You have wounded my soul, Grischka! . . . Your sin and your guilt towards me are great. . . . I bore everything and kept silence. . . . Why was that? Because I loved you . . . and I still love you, but I will not bear these reproaches from you . . . it's beyond my strength to do so. . . . Though you are the husband whom Heaven has given me, I curse you for those words of yours!"

"Silence!" roared Grigori, showing his teeth.

"Halloa! What's all this row about? Have you forgotten where you are? . . . We can have no squabbles here!"

A mist seemed to rise before Grischka's eyes. He did not notice who was standing in the doorway, speaking in these full bass tones, but pushing the intruder aside, rushed past him into the open air. Matrona stood for a moment in the middle of the room, as if struck blind and dumb, then stumbled with outstretched hands towards her bed and threw herself down on it, sobbing aloud.

It was already growing dark. The silvery rays of the moon, piercing the torn edges of the clouds, fell across the floor, throwing the rest of the room into blue shadow. By and by a thick drizzling

rain began to beat against the window-panes, and run down the walls of the Infirmary—sounding like a herald of the approaching autumn with its damp, reeking, darkening days. The pendulum of the clock, with its monotonous tick-tick, marked the passing of the minutes. The drops of rain pattered ceaselessly against the window-panes. Hour after hour passed, and still the rain continued to fall. On her bed the woman lay motionless, staring with wide-open feverish eyes at the ceiling. Her face was dark and careworn, her teeth were firmly clenched, and her cheek-bones seemed to stand out prominently; in her eyes there was an expression of sadness and of painful expectation. Still the rain continued to beat against the walls and the windows. It sounded like some one whispering in a monotonous but persuasive voice, trying to bring conviction; without possessing the power to do this rapidly and with telling arguments; and who was therefore attempting to obtain his object by this painful, tedious droning, entirely wanting in the enthusiasm of real belief.

The grey twilight of a rainy dawn tinged the sky with the colour of steel which has lost its polish. Sleep had not yet visited Matrona's eyes. Ever through the monotonous drip, drip of the rain she seemed to hear the ominously repeated question—

"What will happen next? What will happen next?"

This question seemed to press in on her soul with irresistible force, and resounded like a dull pain through her brain.

"What will happen next?"

She feared to answer the question, though now and then the answer would suggest itself in spite of herself, in the image of her drunken, brutally cruel husband. It was so hard for her to relinquish the dream of a peaceful life, filled with love—this dream which she had cherished for the last few weeks—and she strove with all her might to repel her ominous forebodings. At the same time it became clearer to her that if Grigori were to return to his former evil ways, their life together would be utterly impossible. She had seen him as a different being; she herself had become different, and she could only look back upon her past life with abhorrence and with fear. New sensations, unknown to her before, had awoke within her. But after all she was but a woman, and after a time she began to reproach herself with her share in the quarrel that had just taken place.

"How did it all come about?"

"Good Lord! I seem to have quite lost my senses! . . ."

Another whole sad hour went by in these painful contradictory thoughts. It had become broad daylight; a thick mist lay over the fields, whilst the sky was hidden by grey, heavy clouds.

"Matrona, it is time to go to your work!"

Mechanically obeying the summons, she rose slowly, washed herself, and went with listless, heavy steps into the ward. Here, her languid appearance, her sad face and swollen eyes, immediately attracted the attention of those on duty.

"What is the matter with you then, Matrona? Are you ill?" asked the lady doctor.

"No, I am all right."

"You can speak openly; don't fear to give trouble. You know if there is anything the matter I can find a substitute for you."

Matrona was troubled at the thought of this kind-hearted but strange person perceiving the anguish that was in her soul; so, summoning up her last remnant of courage, she replied smilingly, but with an aching heart—

"There is really nothing the matter! . . . I have had a bit of a quarrel with my husband. . . . It's all over now. . . . And it's really nothing new."

"Poor soul!" sighed the lady doctor, who knew all about Matrona's former life.

Matrona felt as if she should like to fall down at the feet of this woman and break into loud sobs. But she controlled herself and pressed her lips firmly together, to keep back the tears which it required all her self-control to restrain.

As soon as she was off duty she returned at once to her room. Casting a look out of window she

saw the ambulance-van coming along through the fields, evidently bringing another patient to the Infirmary. Still the same thick fine rain fell ceaselessly from the clouds—the fields were empty and deserted. Matrona turned away from the window, and with a heavy sigh sat down at the table.

"What was going to happen next?" Still this question sounded through her brain, and her heart beat time in unison with the words. For a long time she sat there alone in a sort of heavy stupor, though each footstep in the corridor made her start and glance anxiously at the door. . . .

When at last it opened, and Grigori himself appeared, she neither started nor moved, for she felt at that moment as if the heavy rain-clouds outside had suddenly fallen on her, crushing her with their weight.

Grigori remained standing near the door, then, throwing on the floor his wet cap, he approached Matrona with heavy creaking footsteps. He was wet through, the water was pouring from him. His face was flushed, his eyes looked dim, on his lips was a broad, foolish smile. As he came nearer Matrona could hear the water oozing out of his boots. He looked a pitiful object, and Matrona even in her worst dreams had never imagined him thus.

"What a sight you are," she said quietly.

"Shall I fall down at your feet and beg your

forgiveness?" Grischka asked with a weak, sheepish movement of his head.

She was silent.

"No? . . . Well, just as you like! . . . I have been walking about the whole night thinking it out as to whether I am guilty towards you or not. At last I made up my mind; yes, I am guilty. . . . And now I come to ask your pardon; will you grant it?"

Still she remained dumb; her heart was torn with bitter recollections, for as he stood before her he reeked of vodka.

"Just listen! . . . Don't make too many grimaces about it! Take advantage of my being sober and friendly," said Grigori, in a louder and more threatening voice. "Will you forgive me?"

"You are drunk," said Matrona, sighing. "Go and have your sleep out."

"It's a lie! I am not drunk, but only tired . . . I have been walking about and thinking . . . I have thought of many things, my dear. . . . So take care what you are about!"

He shook his finger at her menacingly, and a constrained smile played round his mouth.

"Why won't you speak?"

"I can't speak to you now."

"And why not, pray?"

His face flushed suddenly, and he raised his voice.

"It was *you* who made the row yesterday; *you*

who shouted and scolded . . . and *I* come now, and beg your forgiveness. Do you quite realize that?"

His manner whilst he spoke was excited, his lips quivered, and his nostrils dilated. Matrona knew only too well what these signs foreboded; the cellar, the Saturday night rows, all the dreariness of their empty life.

"I realize it only too plainly," she replied in a firm, decided voice. "You have become once more a wild beast! Ah! that it should be so!"

"Whether I am a wild beast or not, that has nothing to do with the matter! . . . I ask you if you will forgive me? What do you imagine then? . . . Do you think I can't live without your forgiveness? Oh, I can get along very well without it . . . but all the same I come and ask you to forgive. . . . Do you understand? . . ."

"Leave me alone, Grigori! do!" exclaimed Matrona wearily, turning away from him.

"Leave you alone? So that is what you want?" laughed Grigori in a malicious voice. "I am to go away, and you are to remain here, alone, free and untroubled? . . . No, that shall never be! Just see how you like this!"

He seized her by the shoulders, and holding her tightly against him, flourished a clasp-knife in front of her face. The knife had a short, thick, rusty blade.

"Well? . . . How do you like that?"

"Oh! I wish you would stab me and make an end of it," said Matrona, with a heavy sigh. She freed herself from his grasp, and turned away.

Grischka took a step backwards; the tone of her words had filled him with astonishment. He had often heard similar words from her lips, but they had never before been uttered in such a desperate tone of voice. He was completely taken aback at her not showing more fear at sight of the knife. For a moment or two he had been ready to strike her—but now he could not, and would not. Half dazed by the indifference she manifested towards his threats, he threw the knife on the table, and asked her with suppressed anger in his voice—

"What is it you want then, you devil?"

"I want nothing, nothing," cried Matrona, sobbing hysterically. "But you, what do you want? . . . You came here with the intention of killing me! . . . Well then, kill me, and have done with it!"

Grigori looked at her, and was silent. He did not know what to be at next; his sensations had become so mixed and complicated. He had come with the express intention of triumphing over his wife. Last night, when they were quarrelling, she had proved herself the stronger of the two—that had been quite clear to him, and the thought of

it lowered him in his own estimation. It was absolutely necessary that she should now submit to him. He did not try to explain to himself why, but he felt it was absolutely necessary. Being a man of a passionate, complex nature, he had suffered keenly, and had reflected on many things during the last few hours, but his ignorance prevented him from explaining to himself the chaos of emotions, which his wife's just and outspoken accusations had awoke in him. He perceived that she was in revolt against him, and he had brought the knife in order to frighten and subdue her. He might possibly have killed her, if she had not met his desire to subdue her with such passive resistance. But there she stood, defenceless before him, broken down with trouble—yet stronger than he. This gave him a shock, and produced on him a sobering effect.

"Listen!" he said; "leave off this nonsense; you know that I could very soon finish you off with this. . . . One blow under the ribs, and all would be over! That would put an end to all worry and trouble. . . . It's very simple!"

He felt whilst he was speaking that he was not expressing what was in his heart, and he was again silent. Matrona still remained with her back to him, and motionless. Once more she was feverishly and rapidly passing in review the period of their

life together; whilst at the same time there pressed in again upon her consciousness the question—

"What is going to happen next?"

"Motrja!" Grigori suddenly began in a soft voice, placing his hand on the table and bending over his wife. "Is it altogether my fault that everything has gone wrong—that things are not as they should be . . . between us? . . . I know I have an unfortunate disposition. . . ."

He sighed, and shook his head slowly and bitterly.

"If you only knew what an ache I have in my heart! My life seems to me so cramped and narrow! . . . After all, what sort of a life is this? These sick people, for instance, can they be any comfort to me? Some of them die . . . others recover and go on living . . . and I have to continue to drag out my existence! . . . but how? . . . Is the life we are leading any better than the pains of cholera? . . . It is a constant struggle, and how frightful it is! . . . Ah! I can't express all that is in my soul. . . . But I know that I can't go on living like this. . . . But how to alter it I don't know. . . . Look at those, for instance, who are suffering in the Infirmary; what care is taken of them because they are ill; and I also am ill . . . I have pains and cramps in my soul; but no one takes care of me; so I am worse off than they are. And you tell me

that I am no better than a brute. . . . Nothing but a drunken sot! . . . Ah! you don't understand me . . . you are a heartless . . ."

He was speaking in a clear, quiet tone of voice, but she paid but little attention to his words, for she was occupied with her own thoughts.

"You do not answer," he continued, feeling something new and great unfolding within him. "Why do you not speak? What is it you want?"

"I want nothing from you!" exclaimed Matrona. "Why do you worry me so? What do you want me to do?"

"What do I want you to do? . . . Well . . . you are to . . . I want . . ."

Orloff felt that he was not in a state to define exactly what he wanted. He was unable to put it clearly into words, so that he could himself express, and make her understand, what he wanted to say. But he realized that some barrier had arisen between them, which no words, however eloquent, could break down. This thought awoke a feverish rage in his heart. He struck Matrona with his clenched fist on the back of her head, and roared out—

"You damned sorceress! You are trying to provoke me. . . . I'll kill you, you witch!"

The blow was so violent that she fell face forwards on the table. But she quickly recovered herself, and facing her husband with a look of

hatred and defiance in her eyes, she cried out in a loud voice—

"Go on beating me!"

"Hush! Be quiet!"

"Why don't you go on beating me, I say!"

"Oh, you devil!"

"No, Grigori, I won't stand this sort of thing any longer!"

"Hush! I say!"

"I won't be ill-treated by you any more!"

He ground his teeth, and took a step backwards, perhaps with the intention of striking her with greater force. . . . But at this moment the door opened suddenly, and Doctor Wasschtschenko appeared on the scene.

"What's going on here? Do you forget where you are? What sort of business is this?"

His face wore a severe and surprised expression.

Orloff did not seem in the least taken aback, but, nodding his head at the doctor, he remarked—

"It's nothing! nothing but a little clearing up of the atmosphere between man and wife."

And he laughed with a half-nervous, half-sneering smile in the doctor's face.

"Why were you absent from duty to-day?" said the doctor angrily, for he was vexed by Orloff's sneering, impertinent manner.

Grigori shrugged his shoulders, and replied coolly—

"I was otherwise engaged. . . . I had business of my own to attend to. . . ."

"Oh! . . . Was that so? And who was making all that row last night?"

"We were," Grigori replied.

"Oh! it was you . . . was it? . . . Very good, very good! . . . You make yourselves quite at home here, it seems. . . . Go out without permission. . . ."

"We are not slaves. . . ."

"Silence! . . . You would like to turn this place into a vodka-shop, you scum! . . . I'll let you know where you are!"

A wild rush of defiance, a passionate desire to rush out and get free from all these confused feelings that oppressed him, suddenly took possession of Grischka. It seemed to him all at once, that by doing something out of the common, something extraordinary, he could tear himself free from the bonds that were fettering his soul. He shuddered, as a pleasant cool feeling seemed to creep round his heart, and going up to the doctor with quiet cat-like tread he said—

"Don't strain your throat, shouting like that! I know very well where I am . . . a place where you kill people!"

"What are you talking about? . . . What was that you said?" exclaimed the doctor in an astonished voice.

Grigori realized that he had made use of a

meaningless and insulting expression; but he would not retract it; he grew more excited, and continued—

"Oh! it doesn't matter! You'll soon see what I meant! . . . Matrona, pack up your traps; we are off!"

"Not so fast, my friend! You must repeat first what you have just said," insisted the doctor in a quiet voice that boded no good. "Come now, speak! . . . You shall catch it for this, you scoundrel!"

Grischka stared him full in the face—he had a feeling as if he were being carried away by a puff of wind, and as if each breath that he took made him feel lighter.

"Don't shout or swear, Nadrei Stepanovitch! . . . You think perhaps that because it is cholera time you have a right to order me about. . . . But you are wrong. . . . All your cures here are of no use to mankind, they are not worth a brass farthing! No one wants you and your science and your cures! . . Well, if I did call your place a death-trap . . . it was nonsense perhaps I was talking, . . . that I acknowledge . . . because I was in a rage. But to shout at me here like that . . . you have no right to behave so!"

"You won't get off so easily," said the doctor quietly; "I'll have to teach you a lesson! . . . Hi there! Come in, you that are outside!"

A group of listeners had already assembled in the corridor. Grischka's eyes flashed, and he set his teeth.

"I don't call out, and I am not afraid. . . . But if you are so very anxious to give me a lesson . . . then I shall have something to say about it."

"Well, say it then quickly!"

"I shall go into town, and tell every one, 'My good people, listen! and I will tell you how they cure the cholera!'"

"W-what?" said the doctor; opening still wider his eyes.

"Yes, and we'll all come up here together; and we'll help you to disinfect with a vengeance . . . we'll make a bonfire!"

The doctor's anger had turned to intense astonishment, as he listened to this man, whom he had known as a decent hard-working fellow, but who was now carried away with these mad rebellious fancies.

"What are you saying, you fool? . . . How can you be so stupid!"

The word "stupid" jarred on Grischka's sensibilities. He realized that he had fully deserved the title, but the consciousness of this increased his rage.

"I know very well what I am saying!" he added with glowing eyes. "It's all the same to me . . .

To such as I am, it's all the same, at any time; it's useless for us to try and restrain our impulses. Come, Matrona, pack up your traps!"

"I'm not going to leave," said Matrona in a quiet restrained voice.

The doctor watched them both with astonished eyes, not knowing what to make of it all.

"You are either drunk, or mad!" he said to Grischka. "Do you understand yet what you are doing?"

Grischka either could not or would not give in; he felt he had gone too far. So he retorted in a tone of would-be irony—

"You ask if I know what I am doing? . . . But do you know yourself what you are doing? Disinfecting? . . . Ha! ha! . . . and curing the sick people; whilst those who are well are dying from the stress and misery of life! . . . Matrona, I'll knock your head off if you don't come with me!"

"I shall not go with you!"

She stood there, white and motionless; but the expression in her eyes was cold and resolute, as she looked her husband in the face. This look had the effect of damping his heroics, his head sunk on his breast, and he turned silently away.

"Devil take him!" said the doctor. "There's no making head or tail of what he means! . . .

Just listen, my good fellow. Be off with you as quickly as you can, and thank your lucky stars that I let you off so easily! I might have given you over to the police, you fool! Now, be off!"

Grischka cast a lowering look at the doctor. He would rather have been beaten, or given into custody; but the doctor was a kind-hearted man, and could see that Orloff was not at the present moment responsible for his actions.

"For the last time; are you coming with me?" Grischka asked his wife, in a hoarse voice.

"No, I am not going," she answered, throwing back her head, as if she expected a blow.

"Well—go to the devil, all of you!" he cried, with a hopeless gesture. "What the deuce do I want with any of you?"

"You poor fool!" exclaimed the doctor almost compassionately.

"Don't swear!" shouted Grigori; then turning to his wife, "Well, you damned hussy, you see I am off! . . . Perhaps we shall never meet again in this life . . . perhaps we shall . . . that will be just as I choose. But if we do meet—it won't go well with you. . . . That I can promise you!"

Then he turned towards the door.

"Farewell, you tragic hero!" cried the doctor in

a sarcastic voice, as Grigori passed him. Orloff stopped, and turning his sad glowing eyes on the doctor, said in a restrained voice—

"You had better leave me alone . . . don't wind up the spring any more . . . it was lucky it unwound without hurting any one . . . don't try it on again!"

He picked up his wet cap from the floor, put it on his head, lingered for a moment, and then went out without once glancing at Matrona.

The doctor looked at Orloff's wife with a searching glance, as she stood in front of him with a pale death-like look on her face.

Then nodding in the direction of Grigori, he asked her, "What is the matter with him?"

"I don't know. . . ."

"H'm—and where is he going now?"

"He will go and get drunk," Matrona replied in a convinced tone of voice.

The doctor frowned and left her.

Matrona looked out of the window. Through the darkness of the night, and through the rain and wind, she could discern the figure of a man leaving the Infirmary, and walking towards the town. He was the only living thing to be seen in the dreary wet expanse of fields.

Matrona's face grew still whiter; she went towards a corner of the room, dropped on her

knees, and began to pray fervently, her head bowed almost to the floor. Deep sighs and ardent words of passionate prayer escaped from her lips, whilst in her excitement and anguish her hands clutched feverishly at her throat and breast.

CHAPTER IX

I WAS inspecting one day the technical school of the town of N——. One of the founders of the school, a personal friend of mine, was showing me round. He pointed out all the new and model arrangements and gave me an account of everything.

"As you see, we may be proud of our work. . . . Our school, which we planted at first like a small seed, has grown into a well-developed and splendid institution. We have been exceedingly fortunate in the choice of our teachers. In the shoemaking class, for instance, we have a woman-teacher, who was formerly the wife of a shoemaker, a charming bright little creature, simple in her nature, and irreproachable as to character. And how she works! . . . She is indeed a wonder! . . . Her way of teaching her trade too is quite astonishing; she has such patience and love for the children. She gets only twelve roubles a month besides her lodging, and at the price she is a treasure. . . . Out of her scanty earnings she herself supports two

orphan children! . . . She's a most interesting person, I can tell you! . . ."

He said so much in praise of the shoemaker's wife that I became quite curious to see her. It was not long before my wish was fulfilled, and one day Matrona Ivanovna Orlova told me the sad story of her life. At first, after her separation from her husband, he gave her no peace—he would arrive drunk, make a terrible row, watch her whenever she went out, and if he succeeded in catching her, would beat her pitilessly. She bore it all. When the Infirmary was closed, the lady doctor promised to get her a situation in the school, and protect her from her husband. This she succeeded in doing, and henceforth a peaceful industrious life began for Matrona. With the help of the assistants, whom she had known in the Infirmary, she learnt to read and write; later on she adopted two orphans, a boy and a girl, whom she found in the Orphanage,—she made a home for herself and grew happier, only looking back with sadness and horror on her former life. She loved her pupils, and realized the importance of the work that was entrusted to her, and to which she devoted absolutely her life. She had gained the affection and respect of all the managers of the school. But a dry painful cough troubled her, and a hectic flush on her thin cheeks was an omen of the disease which was undermining her strength. Her grey

eyes burned with an expression of fathomless grief. Her married life with the restless Grischka had left these traces behind. . . .

Grischka had, however, for the last three years left his wife entirely alone. He came sometimes to N——, but never showed his face to his wife. "He had gone on the tramp," that was the expression Matrona used to describe the kind of life her husband led.

I had the opportunity later on of making his acquaintance. I came across him in one of the slum quarters of the town, and after we had met two or three times we became friends. He told me the story of his married life—the same story indeed that I had already heard from Matrona. After telling it he seemed lost for a time in reflection, and then added—

"Yes, Maxime Savvatjeitsch, that's how it all happened . . . that's the way I seem to have been lifted up, and then cruelly dashed down again. I never managed to do anything heroic after all. But I still feel the intense desire to do something out of the common, something extraordinary. I should like to crush everything on earth to dust . . . or gather together a band of boon companions, and destroy every Jew in the world—every single one! To do something that would raise me to a higher level than all the rest of mankind . . . so that from my heights I could spit down on all of them.

Something that would give me the right to say to them all, 'You reptiles, you! what are you living for? And how are you living? You are a set of hypocrites and rogues, and nothing else!' . . . After that I should not mind falling head foremost from my heights, even if I got smashed to pieces on the ground! . . . Hm? . . yes! . . . Devil take it all! . . . How dull and flat life is! It has always seemed to me narrow and cramped! Once I had got the weight of Matrona off my shoulders I thought to myself, 'Now, Grischka, the anchor is up, you can sail away freely wherever you like!' But it all turned out different from what I thought it would; my boat got caught in the shallows, and here I am aground! . . . But, never fear, I shall get off some day, and shall yet make a name for myself . . . My wife? . . . Oh, she is nothing to me now! . . . Let her go to the devil! . . . What does a man like me want with a wife? . . . How can I be tied to a wife when I feel as if I were constantly being attracted towards the four quarters of the earth? . . . I was born with the spirit of unrest in my heart . . . and fate marked me out for a tramp, for a wanderer over the face of the earth. . . . It's the best life there is after all. . . . It's free, though it's not without its discomforts. . . . I have tramped all over the place, and never yet have found comfort for my soul. . . . I drink, you say. . . . Well, I suppose that's true; but what else is there to do? . . .

Vodka is the only thing that really soothes the soul; and there is an inextinguishable flame, which is burning up my soul. . . . Everything seems in opposition to me; the towns, the villages, people in every condition of life. . . . I am sick of it all! Would it not have been possible to have invented something better than all this? . . . Half the world seems to be preying on the other half. . . . There is nothing for it but to destroy them all! Ah! life, life, what an invention of the devil it is!"

The heavy door of the vodka-shop, where Orloff and I sat talking, swung backwards and forwards from time to time with a creaking, suggestive sound. As one glanced at the dark interior it appeared like the huge jaws of a giant, slowly but surely swallowing up, one after the other, these poor wretched Russian souls . . . both the restless and the quiet alike. . . .

MALVA

CHAPTER I

THE sea laughed.

It thrilled beneath the warm light breath of the wind, and its surface became covered with faint ripples, reflecting dazzingly the sun; whilst, with its thousand silvery lips it laughed back to the sky. The vast space between the sea and the sky seemed filled with the joyful hum of wave-voices, rippling up, one after the other, over the flat shore of the sandy cape. This sound blended with the flashes of sunlight, reflected a thousandfold by the sea, and melted harmoniously into one ceaseless agitation full of living joy. The sky was happy as it poured forth light; the sea was happy as it reflected the glory of the sunlight.

The wind caressed the smooth powerful bosom of the sea, warmed by the sun's ardent rays; and the ocean seemed to sigh as if fatigued with these amorous caresses; it filled the burning air with the salt smell of its emanations. The greenish waves, lapping the yellow sands, tossed forwards the white froth of their crests, which melted with gentle hissing sounds, moistening the foreshore. . . .

The long narrow tongue of earth resembled some enormous tower which had fallen on to its side into the sea. Its slender point was planted in the vast solitude of the water, laughing up to the sun; whilst its base seemed lost in the distance, where a warm haze hid the mainland. There came from thence with the breeze a heavy smell, incomprehensible and offensive out here, in the midst of the wild pure sea, under the dome of clear blue sky.

Fixed in the sand, which seemed in part covered with fish-scales, were wooden posts. From these fishing-nets hung to dry, casting delicate shadows, fine and light as spiders'-webs. A few large boats and one smaller one lay in a line on the beach, and the waves as they ran up towards them seemed to be calling them.

Oars, coils of rope, and barrels lay about in disorder; whilst amongst them rose a hut made of willow-branches, of bark and of matting. At the door of the hut, on the knotted fork of the branch of a tree, hung, soles upwards, two felt boots; and above this general chaos floated a strip of red rag at the top of a high mast.

In the shade of a boat Vassili Legostev was lying down; his duty was to watch over the interests of the fishing merchant Grebentchikof, whose fisheries were established on this promontory. Lying flat on his stomach, his head in his hands, he was watching

with a fixed gaze the sea, and still further away the almost invisible coast-line. Over there, on the water, a black speck was dancing up and down, and Vassili watched it with satisfaction as it grew larger, and drew nearer.

Half closing his eyes, to shut out the strong glare from the waves, his face beamed with pleasure: it was Malva who was coming. She would come laughing so joyously that her bosom would rise and fall in tempting throbs; she would throw her soft strong arms around him, would kiss him, and in her sonorous voice that frightened away the seagulls she would give him news of what was going on over there on the shore. Together they would make some capital fish-soup and they would drink vodka, whilst they chatted and played about together; then as the daylight waned they would regale themselves with boiling hot tea and little rolls, and afterwards go to bed. This was how they spent every Sunday and feast-day. At dawn he would take her, still heavy with sleep, back across the sea through the fresh morning air. Malva with sleepy eyes would sit down near the rudder, and he would row and watch her. She was so quaint at those times—quaint and charming, like a soft little cat that has eaten a good meal. Sometimes she would slide down to the bottom of the boat, and would sleep there, rolled up against him like a ball. Often she did this.

To-day even the gulls seemed languid with the heat. They stood in rows on the sand, their beaks open, and their wings hanging; or else they rocked idly on the waves without uttering their accustomed cries, or showing their usual fierce animation.

It seemed to Vassili that Malva was not alone in the boat. Could it be that Sereja had come with her again? Vassili moved uneasily on the sand, and then sat up shading his eyes with his hand; he seemed trying, with a vexed expression on his face, to discover who it could be who was arriving. . . . Malva was holding the rudder. It was not Sereja rowing with that strong but clumsy stroke. If it had been Sereja, Malva would not have troubled herself to steer.

"Ahoy!" cried Vassili impatiently.

The seagulls were startled, and became attentive.

"Ahoy! Ahoy!" replied from the boat the clear voice of Malva.

"Who have you got with you?"

The only reply he received was a laugh.

"The little devil!" swore Vassili under his breath.

He spat on one side with an offended gesture.

He was full of curiosity. Whilst rolling a cigarette, he scanned the neck and the back of the rower who was approaching rapidly. The noise made by the oars striking the water, rang through the air, and the sand was ground beneath the bare

feet of the keeper who was struggling against a nervous fit of curiosity.

"Who is with you?" he cried when he was able to discern the smile, so familiar to him, on the beautiful round face of Malva.

"Just wait! . . . You will recognize him yourself all right!" she answered laughing.

The rower turned round, and laughing also, looked full at Vassili. The keeper frowned; it appeared to him he had seen the lad before.

"Row faster!" Malva ordered.

The impetus was so strong that the boat was tossed sideways on to the shore by a wave, and then righted herself whilst the wave rolled laughing back into the sea. The rower jumped ashore, and went straight up to Vassili—

"Good-day, father!"

"Jakoff!" exclaimed Vassili, more astonished than pleased.

They kissed each other three times on the mouth and on the cheeks; after which Vassili's astonishment was a mixture of joy and of trouble.

"I felt sure . . . there was something . . . my heart told me so. . . . Ah! it's you . . . How did you manage it? . . . And I, who was saying to myself, Is it Sereja? . . . No; I could see quite well it wasn't Sereja! . . . And now I find it's you!"

Vassili was stroking his beard with one hand, and

with the other he was gesticulating in the air. He would have liked to have looked at Malva, but the bright eyes of his son were fixed on him and made him feel awkward. His pride, in having a son so strong and so handsome, was struggling against the embarrassment he felt in the presence of his mistress. He moved about restlessly in front of Jakoff, interjecting questions without waiting for replies. Everything seemed to be mixed up in his head, and the culminating point of discomfort was reached when he heard Malva remark in a mocking tone—

"Don't jump about like that . . . for joy! Take him to the hut and give him a feed."

He glanced at her: a mocking smile, which he knew well, hovered in the corners of her lips, and her whole person, round, soft and fresh as usual, appeared at the same time strange and new to him. Malva was glancing with her green eyes from father to son, while she nibbled watermelon seeds with her little white teeth. Jakoff was also smiling, and for a few seconds, which were painful to Vassili, all three were silent.

"I shall be back directly!" cried Vassili suddenly, going towards the hut. "Don't stay there in the sun. I am going to fetch some water. . . . We'll make some soup. I'll give you some fish-soup to taste, Jakoff! You two look after each other; I shall be with you in a minute. . . ."

He caught up an earthenware saucepan which was on the ground near the hut, and retired behind the nets, whose grey folds completely hid him from view.

Malva and the lad followed him.

"Well, my fine young man, I have brought you to your father!" said Malva, eyeing Jakoff's robust figure.

He bent towards her his face, covered with its soft, fair beard, and said with sparkling eyes—

"Yes, here we are! . . . It's fine to be here. . . . What a stretch of sea!"

"Yes, the sea is wide. . . . And the old man? Has he changed much?"

"No . . . no. . . . I thought he would be whiter, and he has scarcely any grey hairs. . . . And he's so . . . strong!"

"How long is it since you have seen each other?"

"Five years, perhaps. . . . When he left the village, I was going on for seventeen."

They went into the hut, where the heat and the smell of the fish were stifling. They sat down—Jakoff on a great log of wood, and Malva on some sacks. Between them was a cask, sawn in half, the bottom half of which Vassili used as a table. When they were settled they looked at each other for some time without speaking.

"It seems you want to get work here?" asked Malva.

"Well . . . I don't quite know. . . . If I find a job . . . I will work."

"You'll find one fast enough!" said Malva with assurance, watching him always with her curious oblique green eyes.

He was not looking at her; but with the sleeve of his shirt was wiping away the sweat which covered his face.

All of a sudden she broke into laughter.

"Your mother very likely gave you all sorts of messages and greetings for your father?"

Jakoff replied with a gesture of impatience—

"Of course she did! And what then? . . ."

"Nothing!" she said, still laughing.

Her mocking laughter displeased Jakoff. He moved away from the woman, and began to think of his mother's words.

When she had accompanied him to the end of the village, she had leant against a gate, speaking quickly, and blinking her dry eyes.

"Tell him, Jakoff, tell him in the name of Christ. 'Father, my mother is alone over there! She is growing old. . . . Five years have gone by and she is still alone!' Tell him, my little Jakoff, for the love of God! 'My mother will soon be an old woman, alone, always alone, always at work.' In the name of Christ, tell him this." And she had cried quietly, hiding her face in her apron.

Jakoff had not pitied her then, but now he pitied

her. . . . And he glanced at Malva with a hard expression, as if he were going to address her in a tone of coarse abuse.

"Well, here I am!" exclaimed Vassili, appearing with a quivering fish in one hand and a knife in the other.

He had conquered his embarrassment, hiding it deep down within himself. He was able now to look at his guests with serenity and good-humour, though his movements were more abrupt than usual. "I am just going to make a fire . . . and then I'll be back. . . . We will talk then. Well, Jakoff! What a fine lad you have grown!" And he disappeared once more.

Malva continued to nibble the grains. She watched Jakoff with an air of familiarity; and he tried not to catch her eye although he longed to do so; and he thought to himself—

"Life must be fine out here; one can eat to one's heart's content. How fat she is, and so is my father!" Then as the silence made him feel nervous, he remarked out loud—"I forgot to get my bag out of the boat. . . . I'll just go and fetch it."

Jakoff rose slowly and went out. Then Vassili appeared; he bent towards Malva, and said rapidly in an angry voice—

"What did you want to come with him for? . . . What am I to tell him about you? . . . What are you to me?"

"I have come, and that's all!" answered Malva.

"You stupid creature! Aren't you ashamed? . . . What am I to do now? Am I to tell him straight out that. . . . But I have a wife at home. . . . His mother. . . . You might have understood!"

"What does it matter to me? Do you think I'm frightened of him? Or of you?" she asked, screwing up contemptuously her green eyes. "And how you carried on when you first saw him! . . . What fun it was to see you!"

"You thought it fun, did you? . . . But what am I going to do?"

"You ought to have thought of that before."

"But could I imagine that the sea was going to throw him up here, without giving me a word of warning?"

Jakoff's footsteps were heard in the sand, and they were obliged to interrupt their conversation. Jakoff had brought back a bag, which he tossed into a corner, glancing angrily towards the woman. She was still nibbling seeds. Vassili sat on the log of wood, rubbing his knee, and said with a constrained smile—

"Well, here you are! . . . What made you think of coming here?"

"It just came into my head. . . . We had written to you. . . ."

"When? I didn't get any letter."

"Is that so? . . . Well, we wrote to you!"

"The letter must have been lost," said Vassili regretfully. "Devil take it! . . . It's always the important letters that get lost. . . ."

"Then you don't know anything about us?" asked Jakoff distrustfully.

"How should I know anything? I have not received any letter."

Then Jakoff told how their horse had died, how they had eaten all their corn before the beginning of February, and how he himself was no longer able to earn a living. There was no more hay left, the cow had been nearly starved to death. They had managed to get along till April, and then they had decided that after the ploughing Jakoff should go and find his father, and should get work somewhere away, during the next three months. This was what they had written. Then they sold three sheep and bought some flour and some hay, after which Jakoff started off.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Vassili. "How is it possible? . . . I sent you money!"

"It was little enough, your money! We had to repair the house; and there was the sister's marriage. . . . I bought a plough. . . . You see, five years is a long time."

"Hm! . . . So it wasn't enough? What a long story! . . . And my soup which is boiling away!"

He rose and went out. Stooping down over

the fire, above which hung the boiling-pot Vassili reflected whilst he tossed the scum into the flames.

Nothing in the story told by his son affected him particularly, but he felt irritated with his wife, and with Jakoff. What a lot of money he had sent them during these five years! And they had not managed to get along with it. If Malva had not been there he would have spoken out straight to his son. Jakoff had managed very well to leave the village without his father's permission; but with regard to his piece of land it wasn't used up yet. And this land, about which Vassili, during his easy, pleasant life had scarcely thought, now returned suddenly to his mind; it appeared to him as a gulf, into which he had been throwing his money, as something useless and embarrassing. He sighed, as with the spoon he stirred the soup.

In the sunlight, the little yellow flame of the fire showed pale and miserable! Threads of blue transparent smoke stretched from the hearth towards the sea, as if going to meet the waves. Vassili followed them with his glance, and thought of his son, of Malva; he was thinking to himself that from this day forth his life would be less pleasant, less free. Surely Jakoff had already guessed what Malva was to him.

She remained in the hut, exciting the lad with her bold, provoking eyes.

"Perhaps you have left your sweetheart behind you in the village," she said suddenly.

"Perhaps I have!" he replied unwillingly.

And in his heart he was abusing Malva.

"Is she pretty?" she asked indifferently.

Jakoff did not reply.

"Why don't you answer? . . . Is she prettier than I am?"

He looked at her almost against his will. Her cheeks were flushed and sunburnt, her lips full and tempting, and now that a mischievous smile lurked about them, they seemed to tremble. She wore a becoming little blouse of pink cotton, showing the outline of her rounded shoulders, her full and supple bosom. But he did not like her green, cunning, mocking eyes.

'Why do you talk like that?"

He sighed involuntarily, and spoke in a pleading voice; he would have liked, if he could have done so, to have spoken to her in a severe tone.

"How must I speak to you?" she asked, laughing.

"And now you are laughing . . . what about?"

"I'm laughing at you. . . ."

"What have I done?" he asked crossly.

And again he dropped his eyes before her glance.

She did not reply.

Jakoff had a very shrewd idea of what her

relations with his father were, and that prevented him from speaking openly. He was not in the least astonished; he had heard it said, that when people worked far away from the village they lost their habits of respectability; and besides it would have been difficult for a strong man like his father to do without a woman for such a long time. But nevertheless he felt awkward both on her account, and on that of his father. And then he remembered once more his mother, harassed and complaining, who was working over there without rest or help.

"The soup is ready!" Vassili announced, standing at the door of the hut. "Give us the spoons, Malva."

Jakoff looked at his father and thought—

"One can see she comes here often, for she knows where everything is."

When she had found the spoons, she said she must go down to the sea to wash them, and that in the boat she had some vodka.

The father and son watched her as she walked away, and, when they found themselves alone, remained silent.

"Where did you meet her?" said Vassili at last.

"I asked at the office where you were; she was there. And she said to me—'Why go on foot along the sand? Let us go in the boat; I also am going to see him.' And we set off."

"Yes? . . . Well, I have often said to myself, 'I wonder how he is now, my Jakoff?'"

The son smiled good-naturedly. This gave Vassili back his courage.

"And . . . how are you?"

"Oh! all right . . ." said Jakoff, dropping his eyelids.

"What the devil could I do?" exclaimed Vassili, waving his arms about. "I kept straight at first. . . . But I couldn't go on like that. It was habit . . . you see I am a married man! . . . And then she mends my clothes, and so on. . . . Besides, one can't escape either women or death!"

This simple maxim seemed to bring his explanation to a close.

"What does it matter to me?" said Jakoff. "It's your business, I am not your judge."

But he thought to himself—"I should like to see her mending his trousers!"

"I am forty-five; that's not old yet. . . . She costs me very little; why the devil should she? . . . she is not my wife! . . ." continued Vassili.

"Of course not!" admitted Jakoff.

But he thought—"I bet she makes his money slip through her fingers!"

Malva had returned with a bottle of vodka and a string of little rolls; they sat down to dinner. They ate without talking, sucking the fish-bones noisily, and spitting them on to the sand near the

door. Jakoff devoured his portion, and this seemed to please Malva. She watched with a tender expression his great sunburnt jaws chewing, his cheeks distending, and his thick, moist lips moving. Vassili was not hungry; he attempted to appear absorbed in his meal, so as to be able to observe at his ease Jakoff and Malva, and to think over the way in which he should behave towards them.

The joyful and caressing music of the waves was accompanied by the ferocious and victorious cries of the seagulls. The heat seemed to be growing less, and from time to time a breath of fresh air impregnated with the pure smell of the sea, seemed to reach the hut.

After having eaten the excellent fish-soup, and drunk several glasses of vodka, Jakoff became sleepy. He began by smiling stupidly, and yawning, looking at Malva all the time in such a way that Vassili thought it better to say to him—

"Lie down here, Jakoff, till tea-time . . . then we will call you."

"All right," said Jakoff, throwing himself down on some rugs. "And you two . . . where are you going? . . . He! he!"

Vassili, annoyed by this guffaw, went out hastily. Malva closed her lips tightly, knitted her brows, and replied to Jakoff—

"Where we are going is not your affair! What is it to you? I advise you not to meddle with

other people's business. Do you hear that, my lad?"

And she went off.

"Oh, very well!" cried Jakoff. "Just wait a bit! Ha! ha! ha! I'll show you. . . . All right! . . . you're a nice sort of young lady!"

He grumbled on for a few minutes longer, then went off to sleep with a drunken, satisfied smile on his red face.

Vassili stuck three posts into the sand, and tied the tops of them together; over this he threw a mat, and having thus rapidly arranged a shelter, he lay down in the shade, put his hands behind his head, and looked at the sky. When Malva approached and threw herself on the sand at his side, he turned towards her a face full of resentment.

"Well, old man," she asked, laughing, "aren't you more pleased than that at seeing your son?"

"He mocks me . . . and why? Because of you . . . that's what it means," replied Vassili, gloomily.

"Because of me, indeed? . . ."

She maliciously feigned astonishment.

"Why . . . of course!"

"Ah! how you upset me! . . . What am I to be up to now? I mustn't come back, I suppose. . . . Well, I won't come any more. . . ."

"Get along with you, you baggage! . . . What a set of creatures you are! . . . He mocks me, and

now you are doing the same . . . and you are the two who are the nearest to me. And where's the joke, I would like to know? You're a pair of devils!"

He ceased speaking and walked away. She remained sitting, holding her knees and rocking her whole body backwards and forwards with a gentle movement, watching with her lambent green eyes the joyous sea, and smiling one of those triumphant smiles which women indulge in who understand the power of their beauty.

A sailing-boat was gliding over the water, looking like a huge bird with grey wings. It was far from the shore, and was moving ever further and further away, towards the point where the sea and the sky melted into an infinite blue, drawing everything into the mystery of its absorbing tranquillity.

"Why don't you speak?" said Vassili.

"I am thinking," replied Malva.

"What about?"

"Nothing in particular."

She raised her eyebrows, and after a few minutes' silence added—

"That son of yours is a fine lad!"

"What's that to you?" cried Vassili, with jealousy in his voice.

"I'm sure I don't know. . . ."

"Just you look out for yourself!" (He threw her a glance of distrust.) "Don't play the fool. There'll

be an end of my patience some time; you had better not aggravate me! . . ."

He ground his teeth, clenched his fists, and continued—

"As soon as you got here to-day, you were up to some game. . . . I don't quite understand what it is, but look here, if you make me understand it, you will be sorry for it! Yes, you may go on making your grimaces . . . and you think perhaps I don't notice them. . . . I know how to treat your sort . . . if you carry on. . . ."

"Don't try and frighten me, Vassili!" she said listlessly, and without looking at him.

"Very well! Don't you make jokes then!"

"Don't try to frighten me."

"I'll make you dance if you begin any of your nonsense!"

Vassili was becoming every moment more irritable.

"Would you beat me?"

She came up to him, and looked curiously into his agitated face.

"One would think you were a countess! . . . Yes, I would beat you."

"I'm not your wife, though!" said Malva in a quiet, didactic voice; and without waiting for a reply, she continued—"You used to beat your wife for nothing, and you think now that you can do the same with me. No! I am free. I only

belong to myself, and I am not afraid of any one. But you, you are afraid of your son; just now you were trying to get over him! And you, you dare to threaten me?"

She threw up her head contemptuously, and remained silent. Her disdainful cold words had extinguished Vassili's anger. He had never seen her looking more beautiful, and he was astonished.

"Now she's off on her high horse!" he exclaimed admiringly.

"I have something else to settle with you. You were boasting to Sereja that I could no more do without you than I could do without bread; that I couldn't live without you! Well, that's just your mistake. . . . Perhaps, after all, it is not you I care for, not for you that I come here. Suppose, after all, it is because I love this beach?" . . . (She stretched out her arms with a gesture of embrace.) "Perhaps I love solitude; here, there are only sky and sea, and no vile human beings. And your being here doesn't count. You are the price that I have to pay for coming here. . . . If Sereja had been here, it would have been Sereja that I should have come to see; if it were your son, I should come also. . . . It would be best of all if there were no one here. . . . I am disgusted with you all! . . . But if I take it into my head, I can any day, beautiful as I know I am, choose another man . . . who will be worth more than you."

"We'll see about that," hissed Vassili furiously; and he seized her by the throat. "So it has come to that, has it?"

He shook her, and she did not try to get away, although her flushed face and bloodshot eyes showed that she was choking. But she placed her two hands on the hand that was pressing her throat.

"So this was what was in your mind!" (Vassili's voice was hoarse with rage.) "And all the time you said nothing; you kissed me, and you caressed me. . . . I'll teach you a lesson!"

He pushed her down towards the ground, and struck her with a feeling of satisfaction on the neck and shoulders; once, twice, with his heavy muscular fist. He felt a pleasant sensation each time that his hand struck the warm, yielding flesh.

"Take that! . . . serpent! . . ." he said with a triumphant air, pushing her away.

Without uttering a complaint, silent and calm, she allowed herself to fall backwards, flushed, dishevelled, but still beautiful. Her green eyes watched him under their eyelids, and seemed to burn with the cold flame of hatred; whilst he, panting with excitement, and pleased with the outlet he had given to his anger, did not notice this glance; and when he leant over her full of the contempt bred of victory, she was smiling softly.

At first her lips trembled a little, then her eyes lighted up, dimples showed in her cheeks, and she began to laugh. Vassili watched her with astonishment, as she laughed loud and gaily, as if she had not just been beaten.

"What's the matter now, you little she-devil?" he cried anxiously, pulling her roughly by the sleeve.

"Vassia, was it you who beat me?" she murmured.

"Yes, it was I; who else could it be?"

He watched her, but failed to understand her mood. Should he beat her again? But his anger was now dead; he had no wish to begin again.

"Is it because you love me?" she asked gently.

And Vassili felt hot all over, as he listened to her whispering voice.

"That's enough now! . . . Devil take you!" he replied moodily. "Are you satisfied?"

"Vassia! and I, who thought you did not care for me any more. I said to myself, 'Now that his son is here, he will send me away on his account.'"

And she burst out into a strange exaggerated laugh.

"Fool!" said Vassili, smiling involuntarily.

He felt himself in the wrong, and pitied her; but recalling the words she had used at first, and which had roused his anger, he replied gruffly—

"My son has nothing to do in the matter. . . .

And if I have beaten you it was because you deserved it: why did you nag at me?"

"I did it on purpose, to try you."

And with provoking playfulness, she rubbed against his shoulder. He glanced hastily towards the hut, and then kissed the young girl.

"To try me indeed! . . . a fine idea . . . now you see what you have got."

"It doesn't matter," said Malva, half closing her eyes; "I am not angry: you beat me because you loved me. . . . I shan't forget that!"

She looked at him fixedly, gave a little shudder, and lowering her voice, repeated—

"No, I shan't forget that in a hurry."

Vassili gave to these words a meaning agreeable to himself; they seemed to cause him pleasant emotion, for he smiled, and said with a stupid self-satisfied expression—

"How do you mean? tell me."

"You'll see!" replied Malva quietly, but her lips trembled.

"Ah! my little jewel!" cried Vassili, crushing her in his arms.

"And, do you know, since I have beaten you I love you twice as much; you are all the dearer to me. . . . You seem to belong to me all the more. . . ."

The gulls flew round them. The breeze from the sea threw up at their feet the foam from the

waves, and the ceaseless ripple seemed to speak of peace.

"Ah! life! life! . . ." (Vassili dreamily caressed the girl, as she lay in his arms.) "This is ever the way of the world: what is forbidden is always pleasant. . . . Perhaps you don't know; but I sometimes think about life, and then I am frightened. Especially at night, when I can't sleep. . . . In front of me stretches the sea, above me is the sky, and all around me is terrifying darkness! And I am alone. And then I seem to grow small, so small, and the ground seems to rock under me, and it seems as if there were no one on the earth but myself! If I only had you at those moments . . . at least we should be two together."

Malva, with closed eyes, was lying across Vassili's knees; and she remained silent. The rough open face of the peasant, tanned by the wind and the sun, was bent towards her, and his beard touched lightly her neck. The girl did not move, only her bosom rose and fell. Vassili's eyes wandered over the sea, and from time to time glanced at Malva's bosom which lay there so near him. And he went on telling her how lonely he was, living here alone, and how painful were his sleepless nights, filled with dark thoughts about life. Then he kissed her mouth slowly, and with the sort of noise that he would have made when eating a warm thick soup. They remained there perhaps three

hours, and when the sun began to go down into the sea, Vassili said in a tone of annoyance—

"I must go and boil the water for tea . . . our guest will soon be awake."

Malva walked away with the indolent gesture of a languorous kitten, and Vassili rose regretfully and went towards the hut. Between her half-closed eyelids the girl watched him as he walked away, and she sighed, as those sigh who have bent too long under a heavy burden. An hour went by; the three had met round the fire, and were drinking tea and chatting.

The sun was already staining the sea with the deep tones of sunset, and under the magic touch of its rays the green waves had just clothed themselves in purple and tender rose-pink.

Vassili, as he drank his tea from a white china cup, questioned his son about the country, and exchanged recollections. Malva, without taking part in the conversation, listened to their slowly-uttered questions and answers.

"The peasants are still able then to make a living?"

"Yes, they get along somehow," answered Jakoff.

"We don't want much, we peasants. A house, enough bread, and on feast-days a glass of vodka. . . . Yes, but we don't even get that. . . . Should I have gone away if I could have lived at home?

In the village I am my own master, the equal of any one, but here I am a servant."

"But on the other hand you are not so often hungry here, and work is less hard."

"Don't say that. There are days here when ones bones feel as if they were being crushed. . . . And then here, one is working for others, whilst there one works for oneself."

"But here one earns more," replied quietly Jakoff.

In his own mind Vassili admitted the truth of his son's argument. Life was of course harder in the village than it was here; but he was displeased that Jakoff should notice it. And he added in a severe tone—

"What do you know about what is earned here? In the village . . ."

"It's like a narrow dark prison," said Malva sarcastically. "And the woman's life there especially, is nothing but tears."

"The woman's life is everywhere the same, and light is everywhere the same, and so is the sun!" said Vassili coldly.

"That's what you think!" cried Malva excitedly. "In the village, whether I wished it or not, I should have to marry. And a woman once married is for ever a slave. She must weave and spin, and look after the animals, and bring children into the world. What is there left for her herself? Nothing but blows and abuse from her husband."

"That's not true, that she gets nothing but blows," replied Vassili.

"Whilst I, here," she continued, without listening to him, "I belong to no one. I am as free as a seagull! I fly wherever pleases me. No one can stop me, and no one can interfere with me."

"And if any one were to interfere with you?" said Vassili, amused with the allusion which he understood.

"Well, they would have to pay for it," she replied softly.

And she dropped her eyelids over her blazing eyes.

Vassili laughed an indulgent laugh.

"Oh! you, you are both bold and weak! You talk like a woman. In the village woman is a necessity of life, whilst here she is one of its pleasures."

And after a few moments' silence he added—

"And one of its sins."

Jakoff, when they had finished their conversation, said with a dreamy sigh—

"The sea looks as if it stretched away for ever and ever."

All three looked out over the limitless expanse.

"Ah! if only all that were earth!" exclaimed the lad, stretching out his arms, "good black earth! . . . and if only we could plough it!"

"Ah! that's right!" said his father good-humouredly.

By his gesture he approved of his son, standing there, flushed with the burning desire that he had just expressed. It was pleasant to him to hear these words, to witness this love for the earth; and he thought that perhaps this same love might recall Jakoff imperiously back to the village, far from temptations. He himself could then remain with Malva, and all would go well as it used to do. . . .

"Yes, Jakoff, that's the way a peasant ought to speak. That's the way a peasant should think. The peasant's only strength is in the land; as long as he has land he can live; but if he tears himself away from the land it's all up with him. The peasant without land is like a tree without roots; one can use it for all sorts of purposes, but it has no life . . . it is rotting. And it no longer possesses the beauty of the woods; it is hewn and cut about; it has quite a different look. Yes, Jakoff, you spoke then some true words."

And the sea, receiving into its bosom the sun, welcomed it with the musical ripple of waves all tinted with the glory of sunset hues.

"It seems to me that my soul melts as I watch the sun setting. . . . That's the effect it has on me!" said Vassili to Malva.

She was silent. Jakoff's blue eyes were searching the distance, far out over the sea. For some time the three watched pensively the last minutes of the

day fading away. The embers died down under the iron pot. Already night stretched its shadows across the sky. The yellow sands grew dark, the gulls had disappeared. All seemed peaceful, dreamy and charming. Even the indefatigable waves running up over the sand seemed quieter and less joyful than during the day.

"Why am I still here?" said Malva. "I must be going."

Vassili became restless; he watched his son.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" he asked in a vexed voice. "Wait a few minutes longer; the moon will soon be up. . . ."

"What do I want with the moon? I'm not frightened. . . . It won't be the first time I have left here at night."

Jakoff looked at his father, and in order to hide the mockery in his eyes, he closed them; then he glanced at Malva; she also was watching him, and it made him feel uncomfortable.

"All right, be off with you!" said the old man in a cross voice.

She rose, said good-bye, and walked away slowly along the shore. The waves running up close to her feet looked as if they wished to play with her. Above in the heavens those little golden flowers—the stars—were peeping forth tremblingly. Malva's light-coloured blouse seemed to fade away in the

dusk as she walked further and further away from Vassili and his son.

"Come quickly, my well-beloved,
And rest on my bosom!"

sang Malva in a loud clear voice.

It seemed to Vassili that she stopped and waited. He spat angrily, and thought to himself—

"She is doing that on purpose to provoke me, the little devil!"

"Ah! that's all right. Now she is singing," said Jakoff.

She only appeared now as a grey spot in the dusk.

"My breasts, they are like
Two white swans . . ."

Her voice rang out over the sea.

"Ah!" sighed Jakoff.

And he bent forward his body to listen to the words of temptation.

"It would seem you have not been successful on the land?" came the thick stern voice of Vassili.

Jakoff, astonished, glanced at him, and then took up his former attitude.

Half-drowned in the noise of the waves, the provoking words of the song were wafted in scattered fragments.

"Ah! how can I sleep alone,
All alone . . . this night? . . ."

"How hot it is," said Vassili mournfully, rolling over on the sand. "The night has come, but it's still hot! Ah! cursed country."

"It's the sand . . . which stores up the heat of the day," said Jakoff, walking slowly away.

"What's the matter? . . . I don't see where the joke is!" said his father severely.

"I?" said Jakoff simply. "What should I joke about?"

"That's just it; there is nothing to joke about."

They were silent.

And above the sound of the waves there seemed to float towards them a blending of sighs and of tender appeals.

CHAPTER II

A FORTNIGHT afterwards, and Sunday had come round again, and once more Vassili Legostev, stretched on the sand near his hut, was watching the sea and waiting for Malva. And the vast sea smiled and played with the sun-rays, and tens of thousands of ripples ran quivering over the sands, leaving there the foam from their crests, and returning to melt once more into the sea. But Vassili, who formerly used to await the arrival of his mistress in peaceful security, awaited her now with impatience. . . . Last Sunday she did not come; to-day she would surely not fail him. He had scarcely a doubt on the subject; but he desired to see her quickly. Jakoff was not here to be in the way; the day before yesterday, when passing with some other fishermen to fetch a net, he had said that he was going into the town on Sunday to buy himself some shirts. He had taken a job at fifteen roubles a month. For several days now he had been working as a fisherman; he appeared

to be bright and happy. He reeked, as did the other fishermen, of smoked fish, and like the others he was ragged and dirty. Vassili sighed when he thought of his son.

"If he will only keep straight! . . . If he goes wrong, there'll be no getting him back to the village . . . and I myself will have to go."

There was nothing to be seen on the sea but the gulls. At the spot where it was divided from the sky by the narrow sandy streak of the shore-line, there appeared now and again little black specks which moved backwards and forwards, and then disappeared. But no boat was to be seen, although it was already noon; the sun's rays shone perpendicularly on the sea.

Two gulls were struggling in the air, and fought so desperately that their feathers flew out on all sides. Their wild cries disturbed the joyful song of the waves, which in its constancy, and uniformity with the triumphant peace of the dazzling sky, seemed to be called forth by the play of light on the surface of the ocean. The gulls fell into the sea, where they continued to struggle and scream fiercely in their fury and pain; then they rose once more into the air in pursuit of each other. . . . Their friends—a whole flock of them—untroubled by the contemplation of this sorry struggle, continued to catch fish, and to turn somersaults in the transparent green sparkling water. . . .

Vassili watched the gulls, and grew sad. "Why were they fighting? Were there not enough fish in the water for all? . . . Men also seemed to try to prevent each other from living. If one of them chose some dainty, another would want to tear it from his throat. Why? There is enough for everybody in life. Why take from a man what he has already got? Generally, these sort of quarrels are started about women. Some man has a woman, whom another man wants to take away, and he tries to attract her to him. Why steal a woman from a man, when there are so many free women in the world, who belong to no one? It's all wrong, and leads to disorder. . . ."

Still nothing appeared on the surface of the sea. There was no sign of the little black well-known speck.

"You are not coming then?" said Vassili out loud. "All right, I don't want you! . . . You needn't think I do! . . ."

And he spat contemptuously in the direction of the shore.

The sea laughed.

Vassili rose and went towards the hut with the intention of cooking his dinner, though he had no sensation of hunger; he went back to his former place, and lay down again.

"If only Sereja would come!" he cried to himself; and he tried to think only of Sereja. . . .

"What a poisonous lad it was though! . . . He was strong, knew how to read, had travelled . . . but he was a drunkard. There was no being dull with him . . . women were mad about him, and although he had only been here a short time they were all running after him. Only Malva seemed to keep clear of him; she doesn't seem to be coming after all. . . . Devil take the girl! Perhaps she is angry with me for having beaten her? . . . But it could have been nothing new for her. Others must have knocked her about. . . . And it won't be the last beating she gets from me."

Divided thus between thoughts of his son, of Sereja, and most often of Malva, Vassili tossed about on the sand, and waited. Vague disquietude turned into suspicion, but on this he would not allow himself to dwell. He hid from himself his distrust. He got through his time till the evening, sometimes rising and walking backwards and forwards on the sand, sometimes lying down again. He was still watching in the hopes of seeing the boat, when the surface of the sea began to darken.

But Malva did not come on that Sunday either. And as he lay down to sleep, Vassili cursed his work, which prevented his going to the mainland, and he awoke constantly with a start, thinking he heard in the distance the sound of oars. Then he would shield his eyes with his hand and watch the troubled dark sea. Over there, where the fishery

was established, two fires burnt, but no one was coming over the sea.

"It's all very well, my girl!" said Vassili threateningly. And he went off into a heavy sleep.

What had happened at the fishery during that day was this. Jakoff rose early before the sun was up, and whilst a fresh, life-giving breeze was blowing from the sea. He walked from the hut towards the water in order to get a wash, and on the shore he saw Malva. She was seated in the bows of a big boat which was anchored close in to the shore, whilst with her bare feet hanging over the sides, she was combing out her wet hair.

Jakoff stopped, and watched her with curiosity.

Her cotton blouse open in front half showed one of her shoulders; and this shoulder looked so white, so tempting!

The waves rocked the boat, and Malva rose and fell with its movements, so that her bare feet almost at times touched the water.

"I say! Have you been bathing?" called out Jakoff.

She turned her face towards him, glanced at her feet; then continuing to comb her hair, she replied—

"Yes, I've been bathing. . . . But why did you get up so early?"

"Well, you are up early too!"

"I'm not here to set you an example."

Jakoff did not reply.

"If you follow my way of living, you will have to look out for yourself!" she continued.

"Oh! how you frighten me!" said Jakoff chaffingly.

Then stooping down over the water he began to wash himself. With the palms of his hands held close together, he scooped up the water, threw it over his face, and then shook himself as he experienced the crisp fresh sensation of cold. Wiping himself with the edge of his shirt, he said to Malva—

"Why do you always try and frighten me?"

"And you, why do you try and gobble me up with your eyes?"

Jakoff could not remember that he had looked at her more than at other women at the fishery, but now he said to her suddenly—

"It's because you are so . . . tempting!"

"If your father hears of your goings on, he'll give you something to tempt you!"

She threw a provoking sly glance at him. Jakoff burst out laughing, and climbed into the boat. He did not know what "goings on" she was referring to; but as she said so, he must of course have been running after her. And this thought made him feel suddenly quite lively.

"What has my father got to do with me?" said he, as he sat down by her in the boat. "Has he bought you for himself? Eh?"

Seated by her side he contemplated her bare shoulder, her half-uncovered bosom, her whole strong, fresh figure smelling of the sea.

"What a fine white sort of sturgeon, you are!" he exclaimed with admiration, as the outcome of a minute inspection.

"Possibly; but not for you!" she said, without moving or changing her rather indiscreet attitude.

Jakoff sighed.

In front of them stretched, beneath the morning rays of the sun, the boundless sea. Little playful waves, born of the breath of the wind, washed softly against the boat. Far away, in the distance, the cape stretched out into the sea. At its extreme end, against the soft blue of the sky could be seen a slender, tall mast, at the top of which fluttered a red rag.

"Yes, my lad," continued Malva, without looking at Jakoff; "I may be tempting, but not for you. . . . And let me tell you, no one has bought me, I am not the property of your father. I live for myself. So it's no use running after me, because I don't intend to come between you and Vassili. . . . I don't want quarrels or wrangling of any sort. . . . Do you understand?"

"But what have I done?" asked Jakoff, surprised. "I don't touch you; I'm not running after you."

"You don't dare to touch me!" said Malva.

She spoke so disdainfully that the man, the human male within him, seemed in revolt. A feeling of almost wicked defiance seized him, and his eyes flashed.

"Oh! I don't dare? . . . don't I?" he cried, going nearer to her.

"No, you don't dare!"

"And if I touch you?"

"Just try it!"

"What would you do?"

"I would give you such a good smack over the head, that you would fall into the water!"

"We'll see!"

"Touch me, if you dare!"

He swept her with a rapid hot glance, and then flung his strong thick arms round her, crushing her body against his own.

As he felt her warm, strong flesh pressed against his own, his blood became fired, his throat contracted as if he were choking.

"Well! strike me now! What are you waiting for?"

"Let me go, Jakoff," she said quietly, trying to loosen his throbbing arms.

"What about the smack over the head you were going to give me?"

"Let me go! If not . . . look out for yourself!"

"It's all very well to threaten; but you're a little darling!"

He drew her closer towards himself, and pressed his thick lips against her flushed cheek.

She burst out into defiant laughter, seized Jakoff's arms, and suddenly, with a strong movement of her whole body, flung herself forward. They fell, both of them clinging together, forming one heavy mass, and disappeared in the spurting white foam. Then from the troubled water emerged Jakoff's wet head, and by his side rose, like a seagull, Malva. Jakoff was struggling desperately, striking the water, spluttering and shouting, whilst Malva screamed joyfully, swimming round him and tossing salt water into his face, then diving to avoid the vigorous strokes of his swinging arms.

"The devil!" cried Jakoff, breathing hard. "I shall be drowned! That's enough now! . . . I swear I'm drowning. . . . Ah! I am sinking!"

But she had left him, and was swimming towards the shore with strong strokes like those of a man. Once there, she sprang lightly into the boat, and stood up in the bows watching, laughingly, Jakoff, who was paddling rapidly towards her. His wet clothes, sticking to his body showed his supple figure from the shoulder to the knee, and Jakoff, when he had caught hold of the boat, coveted this dripping, half-naked girl, who was so gaily making fun of him.

"Well! you half-drowned seal! Get out of the water!" she cried, between her fits of laughter.

And kneeling down she stretched out a hand to him, whilst with the other she held on to the boat.

Jakoff caught hold of her hand, and cried exultingly—

"Wait a minute! Now I'm going to give you a bath!"

He pulled her towards him, remaining himself in the water up to his shoulders. The waves passed over his head, and breaking against the boat, splashed Malva in the face. She laughed, and suddenly with a shout she jumped into the water; the shock made Jakoff lose his footing.

And once more they started playing like two great fish in the green sea, throwing water over each other, shouting, gasping, spluttering and diving.

The sun laughed as it watched them, and the panes of glass in the fish-curing building laughed also, as they reflected the sun. The water resounded under the heavy strokes of their strong arms, whilst the gulls, scared by the plungings and strugglings of these two human beings, flew with piercing screams over their heads, which from time to time were lost sight of under the quickly-rolling waves.

Tired out at last, and drenched with salt water, they scrambled on to the shore, and sat down in the sun to rest.

"Ouf!" cried Jakoff, making a face. "That water is horrible! And what a lot there is of it!

"There is always plenty of what is bad . . . boys, for example . . . there are plenty of them!"

Malva was laughing and wringing out her hair, from which the water was dripping; her hair was dark and curly, but not very long.

"That's why you have chosen an old man!" hinted Jakoff, nudging her with his elbow.

"Some of the old fellows are worth more than the young ones."

"If the father is good, the son ought to be better."

"Indeed? . . . Where did you get your conceit from?"

"The girls in the village always told me that I was not half a bad-looking fellow. . . ."

"What do the girls know about it? . . . You ought to have asked me."

"And arn't you a girl?"

She looked at him hard; an insulting smile was on his lips. Then she became serious, and said to him with anger in her voice—

"I was so once, before I had a child."

"Better said than done!" said Jakoff, bursting out laughing.

"Fool!" replied Malva curtly.

She walked away from him.

Jakoff, who felt nervous, remained silent.

For half-an-hour or more they did not speak, but moved about in the sun drying their clothes.

The workers were beginning to emerge from the

long line of dirty workmen's huts. In the distance they all looked strangely alike, all in rags and barefooted. . . . The sound of their hoarse voices was carried across the beach; one of them was striking on an empty barrel, and the tones seemed to be repeated; it sounded almost like the rattle of a drum. Two women were wrangling in piercing tones; dogs barked.

"They are beginning to move," said Jakoff. "And I wanted to be off early to the town! I have been losing my time with you. . . ."

"You'll never do any good while you are after me!" she said in a tone that was half playful half serious.

"What a way you have of frightening people," said Jakoff.

"You'll see, when your father . . ."

This reminder of his father vexed him.

"What about my father?" he exclaimed roughly. "My father indeed! I'm not a boy! . . . What are you talking about? . . . We are not in a convent here. . . . I'm not blind. . . . And he's not such a saint, after all; and he doesn't deny himself anything. . . . He'd better leave me alone."

She watched him mockingly, and asked him with curiosity—

"Leave you alone? . . . What are you thinking of doing then?"

"I?" (He puffed out his cheeks, and distended his chest, as if he were about to lift a weight). "I have plenty of ideas in my head; I have shaken the dust of the village off my feet."

"It hasn't taken long to do that!" cried Malva, still mockingly.

"I'll get you away from my father! . . . you'll see if I don't!"

"Will you indeed?"

"You think that I daren't?"

"You don't say so?"

"Look here!" he began in an excited, furious voice. "Don't dare me to do it! I . . ."

"What again?" she asked indifferently.

"Oh! never mind!"

Then he turned away with the look of a smart, resolute boy.

"How plucky you are! The inspector has a little black dog, have you seen it? it's like you. When he is far away, he barks, and threatens to bite, but when one goes near him, he puts his tail between his legs and runs away!"

"All right!" cried Jakoff in a rage. "Just wait a minute, and you'll see what I'll do!"

She laughed up into his face.

There came towards them with a slow, loitering step a young bronzed-face fellow, with well-strung muscles, and an abundant thatch of bright red hair. His red shirt, hanging loose, was torn at the back

nearly to the neck, and in order to keep his sleeves in place he had rolled them up above the elbow. His trousers were a mass of holes, he was barefooted. His freckled face was lighted up by a pair of blue eyes, wide open and impertinent; and a big turned-up nose gave to his whole face a look of cheekiness, not to say arrogance. When he had joined the couple, he stopped, whilst his whole body, which seemed apparent everywhere through his elementary costume, shone in the sunlight, he sneezed loudly, contemplated them a few moments, and then made a quaint grimace.

"Yesterday Sereja was drinking, and to-day Sereja's pocket is empty. . . . Lend me twenty kopecks! I shall not return them."

Jakoff gasped as he listened to this rapidly delivered speech; Malva smiled as she examined the tatterdemalion.

"Damn it all! give them to me! I will marry you for twenty kopecks, if you like?"

"You scarecrow! Are you a pope?"

"Fool! At Ouglitch I was servant to a pope. . . . Give me twenty kopecks."

"I don't want to get married," said Jakoff.

"Never mind; give all the same. I won't tell your father that you are running after his girl," continued Sereja, licking his dry, cracked lips.

"Do you think, that he'd believe you?"

"When I take the trouble to talk, I am generally

believed," asserted Sereja. "And you'd catch it from him!"

"I'm not afraid!" said Jakoff.

"Then you'd catch it from me!" Sereja announced, narrowing his eyes as he spoke.

Jakoff did not want to give twenty kopecks, but he had been warned that he must look out where Sereja was concerned, and must put up with some of his fancies. It was not much he asked for, but if it was refused he would give you trouble during working-hours, or else he would beat you. So with a sigh Jakoff put his hand in his pocket.

"That's right!" said Sereja, in a tone of encouragement; and he threw himself on the sand by the side of them. "It's always wiser to obey me. . . . And you?" he said to Malva. "When are you going to marry me? I am not going to wait much longer."

"You are too ragged. Mend all those holes first, and we'll talk about it afterwards!" replied Malva.

Sereja considered the holes critically, and shook his head.

"Give me one of your petticoats, that will be the best thing."

"Yes, that would be the thing!" said Malva, laughing.

"Give me one; you must have an old one?"

"You really ought to buy yourself some trousers."

"I would rather drink the money that they would cost."

"That's the best thing to do!" said Jakoff.

He was still holding in his hand the twenty kopecks.

"The pope says that a man should not only think of his skin, but of his soul. And my soul calls for vodka, and not for a pair of trousers. Give me the money; I shall get a drink . . . and I won't say anything to your father."

"Tell him what you like," cried Jakoff.

And he winked with a self-satisfied look at Malva, and nudged her with his elbow.

Sereja, noticing his actions, spat and said in a more positive tone—

"I shan't forget to beat you; no fear of that! at the first opportunity! . . . And you won't forget it either!"

"But why?" asked Jakoff, disquieted.

"That's my business! . . . Well! and when are you going to marry me, Malva?"

"First tell me what we shall do, and how we shall live. Then I will think about it . . ." she replied seriously.

Sereja watched the sea, screwed up his eyes, and after licking his lips, said—

"We should do nothing but wander about in the world."

"And how should we manage to live?"

"Bah!" said Sereja, with a despondent gesture. "You argue just like my mother. 'How? What?' Women are so tiresome! How do I know? I'm going off to have a drink. . . ."

He rose and walked off; Malva watching him with a strange smile on her lips, and the young man with an angry look on his face.

"What a boaster!" said Jakoff, when Sereja had gone some distance. "At home, in the village, he would soon be put in his place. He would have got a good lesson before now. But here, they seem frightened of him. . . ."

Malva stared at Jakoff, and said between her teeth—

"You don't know the worth of him!"

"What is there to know? . . . Ten a penny, that's what he's worth!"

"That's all you know!" cried Malva, mockingly. "That's what you are worth! . . . But he, he has been everywhere, he has wandered all round the world, and he fears no one."

"And I, who do I fear?" said Jakoff, blusteringly.

She did not answer him; she followed with her eyes the play of the waves, as they swung the heavy boat backwards and forwards. The mast inclined sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, and the bows rose, and then fell, striking the water. The noise it made was violent, and seemed almost angry, as if the boat wished to tear

itself away from the shore, and float out and away into the wide free sea, and was vexed with the cable which prevented its doing so.

"Why don't you go?" Malva asked Jakoff.

"Where should I go?" he replied.

"You were going to the town."

"I shan't go."

"Then go and see your father."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Will you come too?"

"No."

"Then I shan't go either."

"Shall you stay tied to my apron-strings all day?" she asked.

"I don't want you as much as all that," he replied offended.

And he rose and left her.

But he made a mistake when he said that he did not need her. He was bored when she was not near. A strange sentiment seemed to have taken possession of him since their conversation, an obscure desire to protest against his father, a sort of hidden discontent. Yesterday he did not remember having this feeling; nor did he have it to-day before he had seen Malva. And now it seemed to him that his father was in his way, although he was far away out there, on a stretch of sand, almost lost to view. . . . Then it seemed

to him that Malva was afraid of his father; if she had not been afraid, their conversation would have been quite different. Now he seemed to want her, though this morning he had not been thinking about her.

He wandered about on the beach, watching with a melancholy eye the passers-by, speaking to them sometimes in a listless voice. . . . Here in the shade of a boat he finds Sereja seated on a barrel. He is thrumming the cords of a balalaika, and singing, accompanying his song with quaint grimaces—

> "Kind constable,
> Be gentle with me.
> Take me to the police-station,
> For I'm afraid of falling into the mud. . . ."

A dozen workmen, as tattered as he is, surround him, and all like him smell of salt fish and of saltpetre. Four dirty ugly women, stretched on the sand not far from the group, are drinking tea, which they prepare in a great iron saucepan. And a workman, already drunk, though it is still early in the morning, tries to get on his legs and falls down again. A woman laughs and cries; some one plays on a broken accordion; everywhere there is the sparkle of fish-scales.

At noon Jakoff found a sheltered place between the piles of empty barrels, lay down there and slept till the evening. When he woke up he wandered

about without any fixed plan, though he seemed vaguely attracted by something unknown.

After two hours' walking about, he found Malva some way from the fishery, under the shade of some young willow trees. She was lying on her side, and held in her hand a well-thumbed book; with a smile she watched Jakoff approach.

"Ah! this is where you have got to," he said, seating himself by her side.

"Have you been looking for me a long time?" she asked, with some degree of assurance.

"Looking for you? What an idea! . . ." said Jakoff, perceiving suddenly that this was exactly the truth.

Ever since the morning till now, he had, without knowing it, been looking for her. He shook his head with surprise.

"Can you read?" he asked her.

"Yes . . . but badly, I have forgotten everything."

"So have I. . . . Did you go to school?"

"Yes, the municipal school."

"And I taught myself."

"Did you really?"

"Yes, I was cook at Astrachan, in a lawyer's house, and his son taught me to read."

"Then you didn't learn by yourself!" She continued—"Shouldn't you like to read books?"

"No. . . . What should I want to read for?"

"Oh! I should like so much to read! . . . Look

here. . . . I asked the inspector's wife to lend me this book, and I am reading it."

"What is it?"

"The story of the saint Alexis, a man of God."

And in a serious voice she told him how a young lad, the son of rich and noble parents, had left them, had turned his back on all happiness, and finally had returned, a beggar and in rags, and lived in the kennel with the dogs, without telling any one till his last hour who he was. She ended by asking Jakoff in a low voice—

"Why did he act in this way?"

"Who can tell?" replied Jakoff with indifference.

They were surrounded by little hillocks of sand, collected by the winds and the waves. A confused dull noise came round from the direction of the fishery. The setting sun shed on the shore the ruddy reflection of its rays. The delicate willows thrilled with the sea-breeze through every one of their pale green leaves.

Malva sat silent as if listening.

"Why did you not go over there to-day, to the cape?" asked Jakoff.

"What's that to you?"

Jakoff plucked a leaf and chewed it between his teeth. He watched the girl furtively, not knowing quite how to speak what he wanted to say.

"It's like this; when I am all alone, and it's so nice and quiet, I want either to sing or cry all the

time. Only I don't know any good songs, and I am ashamed to cry."

Jakoff listened to the melodious, caressing voice; but her words, far from touching him, only intensified his desire.

"Listen," he said to her in a thick voice, and moving nearer to her. "Listen to what I am going to say to you. . . . I am young . . ."

"And stupid, very stupid!" said Malva, shaking her head.

"We'll grant that," said Jakoff, becoming suddenly animated. "Why should one be clever? . . . I am stupid; all right! Now I am going to ask you. Will you . . ."

"You needn't say any more. . . . I won't. . . . "

"Why?"

"Because."

"Don't be stupid" (and he took hold of her gently by the shoulders). "Do you understand?"

"Get along with you, Jakoff!" she cried out in a severe tone, shaking herself loose from him. "Get away with you!"

"If that's all, I don't care! You're not the only woman here. . . . You seem to think that you're better than the others."

"You are just like a silly little dog," she replied.

And she rose and shook the dust from her skirts.

And they walked back side by side to the

fishery. They walked slowly, for the sand was heavy.

Suddenly, when they were near the huts, Jakoff stopped, and seizing Malva roughly by the arm, said—

"It's on purpose then that you excite me? . . . Why do you do it?"

"Let me alone, will you?"

She escaped from him, and ran off, whilst from a corner of the huts Sereja appeared. He shook his wild unkempt head of hair, and said threateningly—

"You two have been carrying on . . . all right!"

"Go to the devil!" cried Malva.

Jakoff had planted himself opposite Sereja, and was trying to stare him out of countenance. They were about ten paces from each other, and Sereja was staring straight into Jakoff's eyes. They remained thus for about a minute, like two rams ready to butt one another, then each walked off without a word in an opposite direction.

The sea was calm and ruddy with the hues of the setting sun. A woman was singing in a drunken voice with hysterical cadences some meaningless words—

"Ta-agarga, matargarga,
Matanichka my own,
Drunken and beaten
And wild. . . '

And these filthy and meaningless words seemed to fill the air all round the huts, from which arose exhalations of salt and of rotting fish; they filled the air, and destroyed the delicious music of the waves which floated all around.

CHAPTER III

IN the pure light of dawn the sea slumbered softly, reflecting the pearly clouds. At the cape, the half-awakened fishermen were moving about arranging the nets in the boats.

This every-day work was executed rapidly and in silence. The grey mass of the nets seemed to crawl from the sand into the boats, where it lay heaped at the bottom.

Sereja, as usual bare-headed and scantily clothed, was in the bows, shouting directions about the work in a hoarse voice, that betrayed last night's over-indulgence in vodka. The wind played with his ragged clothing, and his unkempt hair.

"Vassili, where are the green oars?" cried some one.

Vassili, as gloomy as a late autumn day, was arranging the net in the boat, and Sereja was watching him from behind. He was licking his lips, which meant that he was thirsty, and wanted a drink.

"Have you got any vodka?" he asked.

"Yes," muttered Vassili.

"All right! then I shall stay on dry land."

"All aboard?" they called out from the cape.

"Shove her off!" ordered Sereja, as he got out of the boat. "Off you go! . . . I stay behind. Look out there! . . . Pull ahead into the open, so as not to tangle the net . . . and tell it out carefully. Don't make any knots. . . . Go ahead!"

They pushed off the boat; the fishermen climbed in, and each taking an oar, raised them in the air, ready for the word of command.

"One!"

The oars struck the water together; the boat swept forward into the vast plane of glistening water.

"Two!" sang out the steersman.

And like the legs of an enormous tortoise the oars moved in the rowlocks.

"One! . . . Two! . . ."

On the shore, at the dry end of the nets, there remained five men—Sereja, Vassili, and three others. One of the three stretched himself on the sand, and said—

"We might perhaps get a nap."

The two others followed his example, and three ragged bodies threw themselves down in a heap.

"Why did you not come Sunday?" Vassili asked Sereja, as he led him towards the hut.

"I couldn't come."

"You were drunk?"

"No, I was watching your son and his mother-in-law," said Sereja, unmoved.

"That's new sort of work for you," said Vassili, with a constrained smile. "After all, they are not children!"

"They are worse; one is a fool, and the other is mad."

"Is it Malva who is the mad one?" asked Vassili. And his eyes shone with sad anger.

"That's it!"

"Since when?"

"She has always been mad. She has, brother Vassili, a soul which does not fit her body. Can you understand that?"

"It's not difficult to understand! . . . Her soul is vile."

Sereja glanced obliquely at him, and replied with an accent of contempt—

"Vile? Oh! you earth-grubbers! . . . you! . . . you understand nothing of life. All you want in a woman is great fat bosoms; her temperament does not matter to you in the least. But it's in the temperament that one finds all the colour of a human being. A woman without temperament is like bread without salt. Can you get any pleasure out of a balalaika without strings? You dog!"

"It's yesterday's wine that makes you talk so well!" interjected Vassili.

He longed to know where and how Sereja had seen Malva and Jakoff the day before, but a feeling of shame prevented him from asking. In the hut he poured out a full glass of vodka for Sereja, in the hope that the fellow might get drunk and would himself tell him all, without waiting to be questioned. But Sereja drank, coughed, and, as if refreshed, sat down at the open door, stretching himself and yawning.

"Drinking is like swallowing fire," he said.

"At all events, you know how to drink!" replied Vassili, astonished with the rapidity with which Sereja had swallowed the vodka.

"Ah! yes," said the other, shaking his tawny head; he wiped his moustache with the back of his hand, and began talking in a confident, didactic tone—"I know how to drink, brother! I do everything short and quick, that's all about it! . . . Make no mistake, I go straight ahead! . . . It doesn't matter what happens! . . . If you start from the ground, you can only fall on the ground. . . ."

"I thought you were going into the Caucasus?" questioned Vassili, who was trying carefully to work round towards his object.

"Yes, I shall go when I want to. When I have quite made up my mind. . . . Then I go straight

ahead: one, two! and it's done. . . . Either I succeed, or else I come a cropper. . . . It's all as plain as a pikestaff."

"Yes, very plain; you might as well have no brain."

Sereja continued in a mocking tone—

"And you, who are so intelligent! . . . How many times have you been beaten with birch-rods in the village?"

Vassili glanced at him and remained silent.

"Very often I should think. . . . And it's a capital idea of your village authorities to drive wisdom upwards, from down below. . . . And you, what can you do with your brain? Where would you go? What would you invent? Say! Whereas I, without bothering myself about anything, I go straight ahead, and there's an end of it. And I believe I shall go further than you."

"It's possible," Vassili agreed. "Perhaps you will even go as far as Siberia. . . ."

"Ah! no fear!"

And Sereja burst into a frank laugh.

In spite of Vassili's hope, Sereja did not lose his head; and that vexed the elder man, who would not offer him a second glass; but Sereja himself solved the difficulty.

"Why don't you ask me news of Malva?"

"What can it matter to me?" said Vassili indifferently, although he felt a secret presentiment.

"As she did not come here on Sunday, you

ought to inquire what she was up to. I know you are jealous, you old devil!"

"There are plenty like her," said Vassili carelessly.

"Many indeed!" said Sereja, imitating him. "Ah! you brutal peasants! Whether you get honey or tar it's all the same to you!"

"What do you want to praise her up for? Have you come to offer her to me in marriage? But I married her long ago on my own account!" said Vassili.

Sereja looked at him, was silent a moment, and then placing his hand on Vassili's shoulder began speaking to him seriously.

"I know that. . . . I know very well what she is with you. I did not get in your way. . . . I neither tried to get her nor wanted her. But now this Jakoff, your son, is hanging round her all day; beat him till you make the blood come; do you hear me? If not, it's I who will do the beating. . . . You are a strong fellow, although you are a regular fool. . . . But just remember this, I never got in your way."

"That's what's the matter then! It's you now who are in love with her?" Vassili questioned, in a thick voice.

"Get along with you; if I were sure of myself I would have kicked you all out of the way long ago! But what could I want with her?"

"Then why are you meddling?"

Sereja opened his eyes wide and laughed.

"Why am I meddling? . . . The devil only knows. . . . She's a woman, and a spicy one. She pleases me. Or, perhaps, I pity her. . . ."

Vassili felt uncomfortable. He realized by the frank laughter of Sereja that the lad was sincere, and that he was not himself running after Malva. But he said—

"If she were a virtuous girl one might pity her. But as it is . . . it seems rather queer, doesn't it?"

The other man did not answer; he watched the boat making a circle, and turning its bows towards land. Sereja's ruddy face wore an open, good, and simple expression.

As he watched him, Vassili's feelings grew softer.

"You are right, she is a good woman . . . she is only light-hearted; I shall have something to say to Jakoff, the young dog!"

"I can't stand him. . . . He smells of the village, and that's a smell I can't put up with!" Sereja declared.

"Is he running after her?" Vassili asked between his teeth, whilst he stroked his beard.

"I should rather think so! You'll see, he'll put himself between you two like a wall."

"I would not advise him to try!"

Far out over the sea the rosy rays of the morn-

ing sun opened out fan-shaped, as the sun rose from the gilded water. Over the noise of the waves a faint cry came from the boat.

"Heave! . . . Ahoy! . . ."

"Up with you, lads! Give way with the rope!" cried Sereja, jumping to his feet.

And soon all the five were hauling at their end of the net. There stretched from the water to the shore a long rope, supple and vibrating, at which the fishermen, holding on to the extreme end, pulled and shouted.

The other end of the net was being drawn ashore by the boat which glided through the waves, whilst the mast as it swung from side to side seemed to cut the air to right and left.

The sun, brilliant and dazzling, shed its beams across the sea.

"When you see Jakoff, tell him to come and see me to-morrow," said Vassili to Sereja.

"All right!"

The boat ran up on the beach, and the fishermen, jumping on to the sand, pulled up their end of the net. The two groups were gradually merged one in the other, whilst the cork floats, bobbing about on the waves, showed a regular outline in the water.

CHAPTER IV

VERY late, the evening of the same day, when the workpeople at the fisheries had finished their supper, Malva, tired and dreamy, had seated herself on a broken, upturned boat, and was watching the sea, over which twilight was gradually falling. Out yonder a fire was burning, and Malva knew that it was Vassili who had lit it. Half hidden and solitary in the sombre distance, the flame flashed up every now and then, and then died down as if crushed. And Malva felt sad as she watched this red spot, abandoned in the waste of waters, and palpitating feebly amidst the ceaseless and incomprehensible murmur of the waves.

"Why do you stay there?" said Sereja's voice behind her.

"What's that to you?" she replied dryly, without moving.

"I am curious."

He watched her silently, and took out a cigarette, lit it, and sat astride the boat. Then as he realized that Malva was not inclined to talk to him, he added in a friendly voice—

"What a queer sort of woman you are! At one moment you run away from everybody, and the next moment you throw yourself at every one's head."

"At yours, perhaps?" said Malva carelessly.

"Not at mine, but at Jakoff's."

"Are you jealous?"

"Hm! Shall we talk to each other straight?"

She was seated sideways to him; he could not see her face, as she interjected in a curt tone—

"Talk away!"

"Have you quarrelled with Vassili? tell me?"

"I am sure I don't know. . . ." she replied, after a moment's silence. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just out of curiosity."

"I am angry with him."

"Why?"

"He beat me."

"Is it possible? . . . He? . . . And you allowed him to do it? . . . Well! . . . Well! . . ."

Sereja could not get over it. He tried to catch sight of Malva's face, and made a mocking grimace.

"If I had liked I could have prevented him! she replied angrily.

"How's that?"

"I wouldn't defend myself!"

"You care for him then as much as that; that

old grey cat?" said Sereja, puffing out a mouthful of smoke. "Here's a nice business! And I, who thought you were worth more than that!"

"I don't care for any of you!" she replied in a voice that had recovered its indifference, and brushing the smoke away with her hand.

"You are lying, I bet anything."

"Why should I lie?" she asked.

And by the ring in her voice Sereja recognized that she had no reason to lie.

"But if you don't care for him, why did you allow him to beat you?"

"How do I know? . . . Leave me alone!"

"It's a queer go!" said Sereja, shaking his head.

And they were both silent.

Night came on. The slow-moving clouds threw dark shadows over the sea. The waves moaned.

Vassili's fire at the end of the cape had died down, but Malva continued to look out in that direction. Sereja watched the girl attentively.

"Listen!" he said, "do you know what you want?"

"If only I could know!" she replied in a low voice, with a deep-drawn sigh.

"You don't know? . . . That's a bad job," said Sereja positively. "I, I always know!"

And with a shade of sadness, he added—

"Only it's so rarely that I want anything. . . ."

"And I, I am always wanting something," said

Malva. "I want . . . what . . . I don't know. . . . Sometimes I would like to jump into a boat, and go out to sea, far, far out. And at other times I should like to turn all you men into tops, who would spin and spin in front of me. I should watch them, and I should laugh. Sometimes I pity everybody, and especially myself; sometimes I want to kill everybody, and then do for myself—die some horrible death. And then I am bored, and then I want to laugh, and men are all a lot of sticks."

"They are rotten wood," Sereja agreed softly. "I was right when I said to myself—'you are neither cat, nor fish, nor bird . . . but you have something of all of them in you. You are not like other women.'"

"Thank God!" sighed Malva.

To their left, behind a chain of sandy hills, the moon rose, flooding them with its silvery light. Large and soft it rose slowly in the blue sky, and the sparkling light of the stars paled, and was lost in its mellow, dreamy light.

"You think too much. . . . That's what's the matter!" said Sereja in a convinced tone of voice, tossing away his cigarette. "And when one thinks, one becomes disgusted with life. . . . One must be always moving, always in the midst of people . . . who must be made to feel that one is really alive. One must knock life about, or it will become

mouldy. Move about in life, here and there, as long as you are able, and then you won't be bored."

Malva grew gay.

"It's perhaps true what you say. Sometimes I think that if one set fire one night to one of the huts . . . that might make things lively!"

"That's a capital idea!" cried the other one, tapping her on the shoulder. "Do you know what I would advise you . . . we might have some fun together if you would like?"

"What is it?" asked Malva, interested.

"Have you warmed up Jakoff well?"

"He burns like a clear fire," she said delighted.

"Is it possible? Set him on to his father. Wouldn't it be a queer sight? . . . They would go for each other like two bears. . . . Warm the old fellow up a little, and this other one still more . . . and then we will set them on each other."

Malva looked hard into his freckled face, as he smiled gaily. Lighted up by the moon it seemed less ugly than by daylight. It expressed neither hatred nor anything but good humour and vivacity, in the expectation of a reply.

"Why do you hate them?" Malva asked suspiciously.

"I? Vassili is a good sort of fellow for a peasant. But Jakoff is not worth anything. Generally speaking, you see, I don't like peasants; they are all knaves. They know how to pretend

to be unfortunate, get bread and everything given to them. And all the time they have a municipality which looks after them. They have land and cattle. I was coachman to a municipal doctor—and I saw something of those peasants then! Then for a long time I was a tramp. When I got to a village and asked for bread—'Oh! Oh! Who are you? what are you doing? show your passport! . . .' I was beaten more than once; sometimes they took me for a horse-thief; sometimes without any reason they put me in prison. . . . They groan and pretend that they can't live, although they have land of their own. And I, what could I do against them?"

"Are you not a peasant?"

"I am a citizen," replied Sereja with pride. "A citizen of the town of Ouglitch."

"And I of Pavlitcha," said Malva dreamily.

"I have no one to protect me. But those devils of peasants, they can live well. They have a municipality and everything."

"What is a municipality?" asked Malva.

"A municipality? Devil take me if I know! . . . It's something made for peasants; it's their council. . . . Don't let's talk any more of that. Let's talk of our own business. Will you arrange this matter, tell me? No harm will come of it. They will just knock each other about a little. . . . I will help you. . . . Vassili beat you, did he? . . . Then

let his son give you back the blows that you have received.

"Why not?" said Malva, smiling. "It wouldn't be a bad thing."

"Just think a little, isn't it amusing to see how people knock each other about because of you? You just wag your tongue once or twice, and it's done."

Sereja for some time went on exposing to her in a flattering light, and with much enthusiasm the charms of the part which he proposed she should play. He was both joking and serious, and was himself carried away.

"Ah! if only I were a beautiful woman! How I would turn the world topsy-turvy!" he cried at the end of their talk.

Then he took his head into his hands, pressed it, closed his eyes and was silent.

The moon was high when they separated. After they had left, the beauty of the night intensified. There remained but the boundless, marvellous sea, flecked by the silver of the moon; and the star-sown sky. The little sand-hills, the bushy willows, and the two long rows of huts like two enormous coffins, appeared quite insignificant in the face of the sea, and of the stars, which twinkled coldly as they contemplated it.

CHAPTER V

THE father and son were seated in the hut opposite each other, and were drinking vodka, which the son had brought to conciliate the elder man, and to prevent them being bored in each other's company.

Sereja had told Jakoff that his father was angry with him because of Malva, and that he had threatened to beat Malva till she was half dead. The young woman had been told of this threat, and that was why she had not yielded to Jakoff. Sereja had mischievously misled him.

"He'll punish you for your larks. He'll pull your ears till they are half-a-yard long. You had better not get in his way!"

This red-headed, disagreeable fellow's chaff provoked in Jakoff a sharp feeling of resentment against his father . . . and against Malva, with whom he could not get a bit further. Sometimes her eyes seemed to lead him on, sometimes they looked sad, and then the desire within him pained him to an extent that became exasperation.

Jakoff went to see his father. He looked upon him as an obstacle in his path, which it was impossible to get over, or to push on one side. But feeling himself as strong as his adversary, Jakoff met his eyes with a look which seemed to say—"Touch me if you dare!"

They had each already taken two glasses, without having exchanged a word, excepting some ordinary remarks about the life at the fisheries. Alone, in the midst of the sea, they were accumulating within themselves hatred, and both of them knew that very soon this hatred would burst out and flame forth.

The matting of the hut swayed in the wind, the bark of which it was built creaked, the red rag at the top of the mast was murmuring something. All these sounds were like a timid, endless, and uncertain lisping of a prayer. But the waves murmured—free and unmoved.

"And Sereja, does he still get drunk?" asked Vassili in a harsh voice.

"He is drunk every evening," replied Jakoff, pouring out some more vodka for his father.

"He'll come to no good! This is what a free and easy life leads to. . . . And you also, you will become like him."

Jakoff did not like Sereja, and he replied therefore—

"I shall never become like him."

"No?" said Vassili, frowning. "I know what I am talking about . . . How long have you been here? Already two months! You must soon be thinking of going back. And how much money have you saved?"

He swallowed with a look of discontent the vodka which his son had poured out for him, and taking his beard in his hand he tugged at it so hard that his head shook.

"I have not been able to save money in such a short time!" Jakoff argued with reason.

"If that's the case, you had better not stay here; go back to the village!"

Jakoff smiled.

"Why these grimaces?" cried Vassili in a threatening voice, vexed with the calmness shown by his son. "Your father is talking to you, and you laugh. You are in too much of a hurry to think yourself free! You will have to get back into harness."

Jakoff poured himself out some vodka, and drank it. These coarse remarks of his father offended him; but he kept his temper, hiding his thought and not wishing to drive his father to fury. He began to feel frightened before this harsh, severe presence.

And Vassili, noticing that his son had drunk alone without filling his father's glass, grew angrier still, though he retained an appearance of calmness.

"Your father tells you to go home, and you

laugh in his face! All right! . . . I'll speak to you in a different tone. . . . Ask for your money on Saturday and . . . be off . . . back to the village! Do you hear?"

"I shall not go," said Jakoff firmly.

"What?" howled Vassili; and leaning his two hands on the barrel, he got up. "Am I talking to you, or not? Dog that you are! howling against your father! . . . You have forgotten that I can do what I like with you; you have forgotten that? Eh?"

His lips trembled, his face was convulsed; two great veins swelled out on his temples. "I have forgotten nothing," said Jakoff in a low voice, without looking at his father. "And you, have you forgotten nothing?"

"It's not your place to preach morality to me; I will break you in pieces! . . ."

Jakoff dodged his father's threatening hand, and feeling a savage hatred rising within him, he said with clinched teeth—

"Don't touch me! We are not in the village. . . ."

"Silence! I am your father, wherever you are. . . ."

"Here you can't have me beaten with birch-rods. Here it is different!" Jakoff spoke sneeringly, his face close to his father's.

And he rose slowly.

They stood there opposite each other. Vassili

with bloodshot eyes, his head stretched forward, his hands clinched, breathed heavily into his son's face his vodka-laden breath; and Jakoff crouched back, was watching his father's movements, ready to parry his blows, apparently calm, but inwardly raging and sweating. Between them was the barrel which served as table.

"You think I won't strike you?" cried Vassili in a hoarse voice, arching his back like a cat prepared to spring.

"Here we are all equals; you are a workman, and so am I."

"That's all you know."

"Yes, that's what I know. Why do you attack me? You think that I don't understand? . . . It's you who began. . . ."

Vassili shouted and raised his arm so rapidly that Jakoff had not time to fall back. The blow fell on his head; he staggered, ground his teeth in the furious face of his father, who was again threatening him.

"Wait a moment!" he cried, clinching his fists.

"Wait yourself!"

"Leave me alone, I tell you."

"Ah! that's the way you speak to your father? . . . your father? . . . your father? . . ."

They were close together, and their legs were entangled in the empty bags, the log, and the overturned barrel. Protecting himself as best he could

against his father's blows, Jakoff, pale and sweating, his face darkened, his teeth set firm, his eyes flashing like a wolf's, retired slowly, whilst his father pressed forward towards him, gesticulating ferociously, blind with rage, wildly distorted; in his anger his hair stood up like that of a wild boar.

"Stop now . . . That's enough . . . leave off," cried Jakoff, cold and terrible, as he emerged from the hut.

His father yelled and came on again, but his blows only met Jakoff's fists.

"Take that, and that!"

Jakoff, who knew himself now to be the stronger and the more agile, led his father on.

"Just wait a moment!"

But Jakoff jumped on one side and ran towards the sea.

Vassili rushed after him with head down, and arms stretched out, but he stumbled over some obstacle, and fell, with his chest on the ground. He rose rapidly to his knees, and then sat down, resting his hands on the sand. He was completely exhausted by the struggle, and he howled piteously with unappeased rage, and with the bitter consciousness of his feebleness.

"Curse you!" he cried, stretching his neck out in Jakoff's direction, and shaking the froth from his trembling lips.

Jakoff was leaning against a boat, and watching

him narrowly. With one hand he was rubbing his injured head. One of his shirt-sleeves hung by a thread, his collar also was in rags, and his white moist chest shone in the sun as if he had been rubbed with oil. He was feeling contempt for his father; he had thought him so strong, and now he saw him overcome and in a deplorable state, seated on the sand, shaking his fists, and Jakoff smiled condescendingly with the wounding smile of the strong over the weak.

"May the lightning strike you! . . . Curse you again and again!" Vassili shouted his curses so loud that Jakoff turned involuntarily towards the fisheries, as if he thought that the desperate shouting could be heard there. But over there was nothing but waves and sunlight. He spat, and remarked—

"Call, call louder! Who are you going to frighten? . . . And if there has been something between us I'll tell you at once and make an end of it. . . ."

"Hold your tongue! Don't let me see you any more! Go away!" cried Vassili.

"I shall not go to the village. . . . I shall spend the winter here," said Jakoff, without paying any attention to his father's shouts, though he watched his every movement. "One is better here. . . . I quite understand that. . . . I am not a fool. Work is less hard here, and there is more liberty.

. . . There you would be always ordering me about but here, just try it on!"

He put his thumb to his nose, and laughed a quiet laugh, but in such a way that Vassili once more seized with fury bounded to his feet, and seizing hold of an oar shouted—

"That's the way you treat your father? . . . Ah! I will kill you!" But when, mad with rage, he reached the boat, Jakoff was already far away. He ran on, and the torn sleeve of his shirt floated in the breeze behind him.

Vassili threw the oar after his son, but did not succeed in hitting him. Having exhausted his strength he let himself fall at the side of the boat, and tore the wood with his nails, whilst his son called out to him in the distance—

"What, arn't you ashamed of yourself? You are getting old, and you put yourself into this state for a woman! . . . I'm not going back to the village. . . . I've had enough of it. . . . Go back yourself! . . . You've nothing to do here!"

"Jakoff, hold your tongue!" shouted Vassili; and his voice rose above that of Jakoff's. "I shall kill you. . . . Get away with you!"

But Jakoff was walking away now, and laughing.

Vassili watched him with furious eyes. Now he was getting smaller; his legs seemed to be hidden in the sand . . . half his body had disappeared . . . now his shoulders . . . and now his head. . . . He

was no longer to be seen. But some minutes afterwards, at a few paces from the spot where he had disappeared, his head showed once more, then his shoulders, then all his body. . . . He looked quite small. He was turning round and saying something—

"Curse you! . . . Curse you!" cried Vassili.

The son made a gesture with his hand, and continued to walk away till he was hidden by a sand-hill.

Vassili looked out in that same direction for a long time, till his back hurt him from sitting in such an uncomfortable attitude—half crouched down against the boat, the palms of his hands resting on the sand. Cramped and aching all over, he rose and staggered, for his limbs pained him. His belt had got pushed up under his arms, he unfastened it with his stiff fingers, looked at it and threw it on the sand. Then he went towards his hut, but stopped as he reached a hollow in the ground, remembering that it was there that he had fallen, and that if it had not been for that he might have caught his son.

In the hut everything was in disorder. Vassili looked round for the bottle of vodka, and finding it among the sacks, he picked it up, with difficulty withdrew the cork, and placing the neck of the bottle in his mouth he tried to drink. . . . But the bottle knocked against his teeth, and the liquid ran

out over his beard and his chest. The alcohol tasted as flat as water. Everything seemed to turn round in Vassili's head; his heart felt heavy, his back hurt him.

"I am old. . . . That's what's the matter!" he said out loud. And he threw himself on the sand at the door of the hut. Before him lay the vast sea, sighing idly, full of strength and of beauty. The waves were laughing as they always did, noisily and light-heartedly. Vassili contemplated the water for a long time, and recalled the covetous words of his son—

"If only that were all land, rich black land that could be ploughed!" An acute feeling of weariness invaded the peasant's soul. He rubbed his chest hard, and sighed deeply. His head fell forward, and his back bent as if an immense weight were crushing him. A spasm seemed to seize his throat. He coughed and made the sign of the cross, looking up to the sky. Some terrible thought seemed to overwhelm him.

Because for a lost girl he had abandoned his wife with whom he had lived honestly for more than fifteen years, the Lord had punished him through the revolt of his son. Yes, Lord! . . .

His son had mocked him, and had torn his heart. Killing was too good for him after what he had done against the soul of his father. . . . And all that for a light woman! And he, old

already, had become entangled with her! In his sin he had forgotten his wife and his son. . . .

And now the Lord in His just anger reminded him of his sin, making use of his son to strike the father's heart with a well-deserved punishment. Yes, Lord! . . .

Vassili remained seated, making the sign of the cross, and blinking his eyes to get rid of the tears which blinded him.

And the sun sank into the sea, and the red twilight faded out of the sky. A cool wind came to caress the peasant's face, which was bathed in tears. Plunged in thoughts of repentance, he remained there till he fell asleep a short time before dawn.

CHAPTER VI

THE day after the quarrel Jakoff went off with a party of workmen in a boat, which was taken out by a tug. They were going out to a distance of about thirty versts to fish for sturgeon in a bay.

He returned to the fishery at the end of five days, alone and in a sailing-boat; he had been sent ashore to fetch provisions. It was noon when Jakoff arrived; the workmen were resting after their dinner. It was intolerably hot, the sand burnt the feet, the fish-bones and scales pricked them. Jakoff walked carefully towards the huts, wishing all the time he had put his shoes on. He hesitated about returning to the boat, he wanted to eat his dinner quickly and to find Malva. During the tedious hours at sea he had often thought of her. He would have liked to have known if his father and she had seen each other, and what had passed between them. . . . Perhaps the old man had beaten her? That wouldn't have mattered; it would have made her more gentle. Otherwise she was too provoking, too bold.

The deserted fishery slumbered: the long wooden huts with all the windows standing open, seemed exhausted with the heat. In the inspector's office a child was crying. . . . Behind a heap of barrels the whisper of voices was heard.

Jakoff went in that direction; he thought he distinguished Malva's voice. But when he reached the barrels he stopped and paused. In the shade, lying on his back, his arms under his head, was the red-headed Sereja. Near him, on one side, was Vassili, and on the other side Malva.

Jakoff thought, "What is my father doing here? Has he left his employment so as to be near Malva, and to watch her? The old devil! . . . If only my mother knew what he was up to?" Should he speak to them or not?

"That's it," Sereja was saying. "Therefore you must say good-bye to each other. And then be off, and go and scratch your land. . . ."

Jakoff started, and his face grew joyful.

"I am going," said Vassili.

Then Jakoff stepped forward boldly.

"Good-morning, all of you!"

His father threw a rapid glance at him, and then turned away. Malva did not move. Sereja kicked out his leg, and said in a forced voice—

"Here is our well-beloved son Jakoff, who is returning from a far country."

Then he added in his ordinary voice—

"Let us skin him alive, and make drums out of his skin."

Malva laughed softly.

"It's hot," said Jakoff, sitting down by them.

Vassili glanced at him once more, as if unwillingly.

"I have been expecting you here all the morning, Jakoff. The inspector told me that you were to come." His voice seemed to the young man to be weaker than usual, and his face seemed altered.

"I have come to fetch some provisions," said Jakoff.

And he asked Sereja for a cigarette.

"I have no tobacco for a fool like you!" replied the latter without moving.

"I'm going home, Jakoff!" said Vassili gravely, digging at the sand with his finger.

"Why?" asked his son innocently.

"Never mind. . . . Shall you remain here?"

"Yes, I shall remain. . . . What could both of us do at home?"

"Very well. I have nothing to say. Do as you choose! You are no longer a child. Only remember that I shan't live very much longer. I shall keep alive perhaps, but I don't know how I shall manage to work. . . . I have lost the habit of working on the land. . . . Don't forget therefore that you have your mother there."

It was evidently painful to him to speak. The

words seemed to stick between his teeth. Whilst he twisted his beard, his hand trembled.

Malva watched him. Sereja had half closed one eye, and with the other which was wide open he watched Jakoff. The boy was glad, but fearing to betray his feelings, he was silent, and hung his head.

"Don't forget your mother therefore, Jakoff. Remember that you are all that is left to her!" said Vassili.

"I know!" said Jakoff, shrugging his shoulders.

"That's all right if you know it," added his father, with a distrustful glance. "I only warn you not to forget it."

"All right!"

Vassili sighed deeply. They were all silent for some minutes.

Then Malva said—

"They will soon be ringing the bell for work."

"I am going," said Vassili, rising.

And they all rose with him.

"Good-bye, Sereja. If you ever come to the Volga, perhaps you will remember to come and see me? . . . The District of Simbirsk, the village of Malso, near Nikolo-Livolvsk."

"All right," said Sereja.

He shook Vassili's hand, holding it for a long time in his big, thick-veined paw, covered with red hairs. He smiled into the sad, serious face of Vassili.

"Nikolo-Livolvsk is a big town, every one knows it, and we are only four versts from there," the peasant explained.

"All right, I will come and see you if I am that way."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, my dear fellow."

"Good-bye, Malva!" whispered Vassili, without raising his eyes to her.

She wiped her lips leisurely with her sleeve, threw her two white arms round his neck, and kissed him three times, on his lips and on his cheeks.

He was overcome, and muttered some indistinct words. Jakoff dropped his head to hide a smile; but Sereja was unmoved, and even yawned slightly as he looked up at the sky.

"It will be hot walking," he said.

"Never mind! . . . Good-bye to you also, Jakoff."

"Good-bye."

They were face to face with one another, without knowing what to do. The sad word "good-bye," which had just been repeated so many times, awoke in the soul of Jakoff a feeling of tenderness for his father, but he did not know how to express it. Should he embrace his father as Malva had done, or shake hands with him like Sereja? . . . And Vassili was wounded by this hesitation which was visible in the attitude of his son, and at the

same time he felt something like shame. He remembered what had taken place at the cape, and he thought of Malva's kisses.

"Well, think of your mother!" said Vassili at last.

"Oh! yes!" replied Jakoff cordially. "Don't be anxious . . . I know."

And he shook his head.

"That's all. Be happy! May God protect you. . . . Don't think ill of me. . . . The boiler, Sereja, is buried in the sand, near the bows of the green boat."

"What does he want with the boiler?" asked Jakoff suddenly.

"He has taken my place over there at the cape," explained Vassili.

Jakoff glance at Sereja enviously, then at Malva, and hung his head to hide the flash of joy in his eye.

"Good-bye, brothers, I am going."

Vassili nodded to them. Malva followed him.

"I am going to walk with you a little bit of the way."

Sereja flung himself on the ground and seized Jakoff's leg as this latter was about to follow Malva.

"Stop! where are you going to?"

"Leave me alone!" said Jakoff, moving a step forward. But Sereja had seized his other leg.

"Sit down beside me."

"Why! . . . What new nonsense are you up to?"

"It's not nonsense! Sit down."

Jakoff set his teeth, and obeyed.

"What do you want?"

"Wait. Hold your tongue . . . whilst I think; and then I'll talk to you."

He looked the lad up and down, and Jakoff submitted.

Malva and Vassili walked on for a few moments in silence. Malva's eyes had a strange sparkle in them. And Vassili was gloomy and preoccupied. Their feet sank into the sand, and they walked with difficulty.

"Vassia!"

"Well?"

He looked at her, and turned away immediately.

"It was I who made you quarrel on purpose with Jakoff. . . . You might have both lived here without quarrelling," she said, in a voice that was even and unmoved.

There was not a shade of regret in her words.

"Why did you do that?" Vassili asked, after a moment's silence.

"I don't know . . . for no reason."

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"That's a nice thing you have done," he said irritably.

She was silent.

"You will make me lose my boy, lose him altogether; you sorceress! Have you no fear of God? Are you not ashamed? . . . What are you going to do?"

"What ought I to do?" she said.

A mixture of agony and of despair sounded in her voice.

"What ought you to do?" cried Vassili, flashing out suddenly into rage.

He felt a passionate desire to strike her, to throw her down and bury her in the sand, to kick her in the face and on the bosom. . . .

He clinched his fists and cast a look behind him.

Over there near the barrels he saw Sereja and Jakoff, and their faces were turned in his direction.

"Get along with you; or I shall do for you! . . ."

He stopped and breathed curses into her face. His eyes were bloodshot, his beard trembled, and his hands were stretched involuntarily towards Malva's hair, which appeared above her shawl.

Her green eyes were fixed on him.

"You deserve to be killed! . . . But wait a bit. Some one will break your head one of these days!"

She smiled, but remained silent. Then sighing deeply, she said—

"That's enough now. Good-bye!"

And turning quickly on her heels, she walked back.

Vassili yelled after her and ground his teeth. Malva, as she walked tried to put her feet into the footmarks which Vassili had made, and when she succeeded she carefully destroyed all traces of his footprints. Finally she reached the barrels, when Sereja received her with the question—"Well, you walked a bit of the way with him?"

She made an affirmative sign with her head, and sat down by him.

And Jakoff watching her, smiled softly, moving his lips as if he were saying things to her that no one else heard.

"And when you left him did you cry?" asked Sereja.

"When are you going over there to the cape?" she asked him, indicating the sea with a movement of her head.

"This evening."

"I shall go with you."

"Bravo! . . . I like that."

"And I also, I shall go!" said Jakoff.

"Who invites you?" said Sereja, screwing up his eyes.

The harsh tinkle of a cracked bell was heard; it was the call to work. The sounds rang out through the air, one following rapidly the other, as if they feared to be late, or to be drowned in the sound of the waves.

"She will invite me," said Jakoff.

He glanced at Malva defiantly.

"I? . . . What should I want with you?" she replied, with surprise in her voice.

"Let's speak plainly, Jakoff," said Sereja. "If you bother her I'll beat you into a jelly. And if you touch her with a finger, I'll crush you like a fly. I'll give you one over the head that will just finish you altogether. I'm very straightforward in my ways." His face, his whole figure and his knotted arms threatened Jakoff's throat, and seemed to prove eloquently, that in reality, to kill a man was to Sereja a very simple matter.

Jakoff stepped back and said in a stifled voice—

"Wait a minute! It's she who . . ."

"Hold your tongue, and there's an end of it! What does all this mean? It's not you, you dog, who are going to eat the lamb. If you get the bones thrown to you, you may say thank you. We've had enough of this."

Jakoff looked at Malva. Her green eyes were laughing in a way that wounded him, and she rubbed up against Sereja in such a coaxing way that Jakoff felt the perspiration break out all over him.

They walked off side by side, and then both of them burst out laughing. Jakoff crushed his right foot hard into the sand, and remained standing thus, his body stretched forward, his face red, his heart beating.

Far away over the dead ripples of the sand, the outline of a small dark human figure was moving; on his right shone the sun and the mighty sea, and on his left, as far as the horizon, there was sand, nothing but sand, smooth, vast and silent. Jakoff watched the solitary man and blinked his eyes, which were full of tears—tears of humiliation and of painful uncertainty—and he rubbed his chest roughly with both his hands.

At the fishery, work was going on briskly. Jakoff heard the deep, melodious voice of Malva, saying angrily—

"Who has taken my knife?"

The waves rippled, the sun shone, the sea laughed.

THE END

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